

JAY Lit

ISSUE 04
JULY 2021



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

GHANA
MALAWI
NIGERIA
SOUTH AFRICA
TANZANIA
ZAMBIA
ZIMBABWE

YORUBA

language poetry | a JAY Lit first

9 INCREDIBLE
SHORT STORIES

20 WORKS • 17 WRITERS • 7 COUNTRIES
ESSAYS • POETRY • PLAYS • SHORT STORIES • TRANSLATIONS

JAY LIT

ISSUE 04
JULY 2021



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

The Journal of African Youth Literature (JAY LIT) is a grassroots initiative providing African youths with a platform to publish their writing. We also publish writing by other individuals that falls under the general theme of African youth. We publish content from across Africa in any languages used on the continent.

Submissions for the fifth issue open on 1 September 2021.

Please consult the [author guidelines](#) on the website carefully before submitting.

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EDITORIAL FOREWORD

There's much to complain about at this time, but I've decided to let this issue's writers shout over the times we find ourselves in. Listen to voices of young Africa, and you can survive anything.

A language first for JAY Lit, this issue brings you two beautiful poems in Yoruba, with English translations, by Lanre Lagada-Abayomi, Head of Yoruba Service at Voice of Nigeria Radio. A poststructural analysis of student lingo in Ghana by Charles Prempeh is found in the Essay section.

We have nine short stories from across Africa, including the tragicomedy *The Lost Engagement* by Tinashe Chipenyu, Ufuoma Bakporhe's *The Girl With The 'Stache*, an LGBTQ+ story of a girl with hypertrichosis and her secret admirer, and *Down by The Vlei*, a creepy ghost story by Niall Hurley.

Our young adult reads include Stephen Swai's *The Girl Who Played Rede*, Kutloano Mkhwanazi's *The Power of a Half-Truth*, and Lukhanyiso Nqeno's *Not Today. I am Johnny Green* by Akwasi Addai tells the story of a young man's awakening to the real position of women in society. Dexter Alex's tragic *The Night the Sky Rained Fire* is about the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda. The short story section concludes with Jo-Anne Delaney King's dreamy surrealist bedtime story for grown-ups, *Boy*.

The poetry section includes Caelin Falconer's African goddess and Judith Mathebula's homage to her homeland, *South Africa*. Chansa Chisala writes about the experiences of foreign nationals in South Africa in *Home / Ekhaya / Kunganda*. Gracious Mulinga's poem *Statistics* is about the trajectory of the Covid-19 pandemic on the individual in Africa and Malawi specifically. Look out for a unique and moving poetry collection by Sally Waters.

The play by Julie Graham, *Girl*, is a deeply emotive solo performance for an actress playing four different roles.

I hope you enjoy every word as much as I have.

#africanstoriesmatter

Bronwyn Bowles-King

JAY Lit Managing Editor
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JOIN OUR AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

Would you be interested in helping us promote JAY Lit to other authors from your home country? If you want to see your country and home language represented in the Journal, being an Ambassador is a great way to make it happen! We want to address the following through this initiative:

- We receive few submissions from nations outside South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. We are determined to change that and are seeking ways to reach other African writers. You can start simply by telling your friends on social media about the Journal.
- We want more submissions that aren't in English, though we welcome those too. Perhaps you can help us reach those who are writing or could write in languages such as Swahili, Chichewa, Zulu, etc. All African languages are welcome, as well as those spoken widely in certain regions such as French and Portuguese.
- We are also interested in the way youths mix and use various languages together in practice (multilingualism) and capturing that for cultural preservation.
- Another major challenge we face is reaching rural areas. Can you reach out to those in outlying areas in your country or region? Sharing info about JAY Lit with high schools, teachers, libraries, community forums, etc. in rural areas can ensure we are more inclusive and give opportunities to those in disadvantaged areas.



CONTENTS

Poetry	6
<i>Caelin Q. Falconer</i>	8
African goddess	
<i>Chansa Chisala</i>	10
Home / Ekhaya / Kunganda	
<i>Gracious Mulinga</i>	12
Statistics	
<i>Judith Mathebula</i>	14
South Africa	
<i>Sally Waters</i>	16
Escape plan	
Tainted Diamond	
Musical Rotation	
Phenomenal	
Short Stories	20
<i>Ufuoma Bakporhe</i>	
The Girl With The 'Stache	22
<i>Niall Hurley</i>	
Down by The Vlei	28
<i>Stephen Swai</i>	
The Girl Who Played Rede	35
<i>Lukhanyiso Nqeno</i>	
Not Today	45
<i>Dexter Alex</i>	
The Night the Sky Rained Fire	54



<i>Kutloano Boikgantsho Mkhwanazi</i>	
The Power of a Half-Truth	64
<i>Tinashe J. Chipenyu</i>	
The Lost Engagement	68
<i>Akwasi Addai</i>	
I am Johnny Green	77
<i>Jo-Anne Isobel Delaney King</i>	
Boy	94
Plays	98
<i>Julie Graham</i>	
Girl	100
Translations	106
<i>Lanre Lagada-Abayomi</i>	
Obìnrin (Adúláràwò) [A Lady (An African Lady)]	108
Ìrìn Àrè [The Undue Migration]	
Essays	110
<i>Charles Prempeh</i>	
Philosophies of romantic love and rumours of conjugal relations at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana 2004-2009: A poststructural analysis of student popular culture	112

THE JOURNAL OF
AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

POETRY



Caelin Q Falconer

Caelin is a South African student with ink for blood and a typewriter for a brain. She has loved writing ever since she learnt how, and her first story was written on a computer the size of a house. In her final year of school at Theodor Herzl in Gqeberha, she cannot tell you what her next chapter holds – only that writing will, without a doubt, be a part of it.

[Follow @cae.falconer on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/cae.falconer)



African goddess

i perch in front of the mirror
peering
with eagle eyes at my reflection

mother says
the mind distorts mirrors
but as my rough fingers trace these
smooth cheeks and my chapped lips
widen into a grin,
the girl in the mirror is a perfect mimic

cautious, but mostly curious
i lift my fingers to the glass

she has earthy brown eyes
in contrast, mine are more of a dull brown
i admire this honey-coloured girl
as i have an unchangeable nut-brown skin
she is long-limbed and must be
lithe as a panther
i am the polar opposite: clumsy as a bear
we share just one feature in common -
our mop of dark hair

i observe the girl in the mirror intently
i can peer at her all day, but
nothing will enable me to really see her
- her hopes and her dreams,
her triumphs and trials,
instead i just see her
the girl in my mirror

i notice her perfect poise -
her shoulders back, but i cannot feel
the weight pressed there
i scan her full upturned lips and wonder
the words that have died a hasty death there
to keep from staining this air
i contemplate her pretty throat and wonder
the words which have clawed their way up
to instead be neatly tucked under her tongue
i stare at her eyes
i do not know all she has seen
i do not know the thoughts that have
whispered themselves into her head and
never left

simply, i do not know the girl in the mirror
every day i learn to love
and understand her more
- she whose depth and beauty
cannot be contained by
the shallowness
of a mirror.



Chansa Chisala

Chansa Chisala grew up on a heavy diet of literature and strongly believes in the transformative power of words. She grew up in Johannesburg but was born in Lusaka, Zambia. Chansa is the founder of an online business called The Professional Network, which aims to provide access to knowledge, information, and resources for young people, equipping them with the tools needed to navigate their careers and finances successfully. She holds a degree in Accounting Sciences. Chansa's passions include mental health, the empowerment of black women, and purposeful, intentional living.

[Follow @thepronf_network on Instagram](#)



Home / Ekhaya / Kunganda

Searching for home in A4 papers,
Searching for home in identity cards
and dockets
and documents
and passport pockets
searching for home in language, dialects,
in facial features
in shades of skin
[Kwerekwere, get out of our country! they say]

Feeling at home in spaces and places
in music
and art
and lokshin bioskop
in entertainment and a shared sense of humour
[Kwerekwere, get out of our country! they say]

Searching for home in conversation
and lifestyle
and currency
and systems
[Mwi kala kwisa? Aba te ba kuno! they say]

Feeling at home in language, dialects
in facial features
in shades of skin
[Mwi kala kwisa? Aba te ba kuno! they say]

Searching for home in the crevices between
teeth and inner cheek
the movements
and clicking of tongue
the sound and vibration of lip
[Kwerekwere, get out of our country! they say]

Notes

Kwerekwere – a derogatory South African term used to refer to African foreign nationals

Mwi kala kwisa, aba te ba kuno – Where do you stay? These ones are not from here

lokshin bioskop – original South African films



Gracious Mulinga

Gracious Mulinga is a 30-year-old Malawian writer based in Zomba, where he works for Chanco Community Radio and Chanco TV. He loves reading and writing short stories and poems. Some of his short stories have been published in Malawian newspapers.

[Follow @ChancoCommunityRadio on Facebook](#)



Statistics

Mere numbers
Of casualties of a distant war
Random numbers
Rising steadily
Rising rapidly
Rising constantly
Numbers without a face

Relax.

Closer to home
Knocking on the door
Random nameless figures
Rising still
Raging still
Rising fiercely
A war raging in the distance
Still, faceless numbers

Easy.

In the backyard
The bushfire rages
No firebreaks
Numbers becoming faces
Faces known
Faces loved
Names replacing figures
Not just mere statistics anymore.

Panic.

Fortuitous brews and remedies
Whispers of a vaccine
Truckloads of conspiracy theories
Oodles of misinformation
Slapdash divinations of clear skies
Bushed firefighters, naïve populace
Disappearing names, faces – numbers no more

Confusion.

About the poem

The poem is about how the COVID-19 pandemic has been perceived from its genesis. The author draws inspiration from trends and behaviours in his home country, Malawi, and believes the same has been the case in many other parts of the world. This piece of poetry documents moments from when the pandemic was just a distant war, to moments when the pandemic became a reality and affected people on a personal level.



Judith Mathebula



Judith is based in Soshanguve, Pretoria. The 25-year-old poet and songwriter enjoys entering writing competitions from time to time. Judith spends most of her time reading books to polish her writing and vocabulary.

South Africa

My home of joy without happiness
The house with loud laughter
And family dances but no peace
With united broken hearts
Yet as cold as isolation

Churches with cultures while the gospel is missing
Elsewhere the priests are misleading with the same feared name
In worship they claim the price of praise
Through miraculous actions we bow
For nobody knows who the Savior really is
Masked as they come, nothing isn't what it seems
What are you really chasing, if it ain't true
For truth lives amongst each one of us

Yesterday my backyard was a place of praise
Today the same yard becomes a playground
For I have been injured here
Where my siblings grew freely
Playing with tins, mistakenly stamped on a broken bottle
The same my brother used to sip alcohol through
Through depression he was careless
Throwing it away with anger towards his background
Knowing that nobody has his back
Since it isn't as round as the world
Yet I ache in pain viewing his future
So Leathered with darkness
Even education can't lighten it

But a true player can brighten
The whole country
My South Africa is at stake
While we busy slicing the truth
And preparing lies to serve our loved ones.



Sally Waters

Sally Waters is a Ghanaian writer. She loves exploring human experiences through her poetry, with writing that is at times autobiographical and at times reflective of her encounters with different personae in society. To keep her mind and body fresh, Sally is into basketball, tennis and cooking – all of which share the same passion she has for writing. She's also passionate about serving people, and enjoys being sarcastic. She usually writes when she is alone because she enjoys solitude. She wants to influence people positively — young or old, female or male — through her work when it eventually comes to light. Sally currently lives and writes from Nanjing, China. Her work has previously appeared in *Kalahari Review*.

[Follow @sallywatersgh on Instagram](#)



Escape plan

Never blossomed from a loving society
Sprouted from various branches
The thickness of blood and water's paleness
My life was not promised
My destiny was not defined

I was taught by many diverse teachers
Felt if I exited, no one would miss me
Clouded by ironies
All I could remember was pains
Immature but mature in thought
Had immense love to share
Yet no one to receive
My shadow was my best friend

Episodes of pains replaying
Every day was a musical rotation
Could not stop dancing
Even if I did not enjoy the tune

My skin was magnetic to catastrophes
My tomorrow was rued
My nickname was Mistake
My biggest fear was becoming a burden to somebody
Life was an acrimony
Life and I, put in a ring
Nearly swallowed
But fought through
I won
I conquered
I dissolved my imperfections and impurities
My blessings came running back to me
My unspoken words finally came singing out loud
My desires resurrected
My destiny was promised
Strength, my alpha
I beat the odds
Wore redemption clothes
My life had meaning
Planted love, fed a nation
Taste, bitter to sweet
My dynasty was ruled by me
Started dining with royals
My entire kingdom was made
Through my battleships and integrity

Sally Waters

Birds of hope, I flew
Bread of hope, I consumed
Body of amour, I wore
Shield of strength, I fought
Tongue of wisdom, I spoke
Favors of men, I encountered
Inspirations, I dished out
Motivations, I blessed
Light of life, I believed
Truth of life, I birthed
Rose of life, I loved
Hope of life, I lived.

Tainted Diamond

When you stand on the edge of the bridge
And I stumble from its other end
The wind that pushes you to the sea
Appears to be emanating here from me

Yet just like you I fly along with the papers
Landing in city squares before storms.
In your stethoscopes you see me belching
As just like you I die when no one is here watching.
My head was made out of a brain and a heart
So I act along your lines as you pull the cart
The winds and our future blowing this same way
With you and I in our sleep not giving way.

There is a secret I will never reveal even to myself
About how I adapted and molded rejection into the self
As I dwell in a quake that breeds sorrow
There should be nothing from life we can borrow
For it happens in a blink of an eye
Like how you will never know 'yes' used to be 'aye'
Until time blew away its plot
Just as within a blink you will miss a lot.

Musical Rotation

Paradoxes of my being
Crown the powerful on the exterior
Confine the weak to the interior.

Sometimes I want to believe life is unfair.

But what is it about life that I don't understand?
I've lived it since I touched down from the sky.

Unfair

It wonders, not knowing whether it should smile
Or fume at my ungratefulness to time.

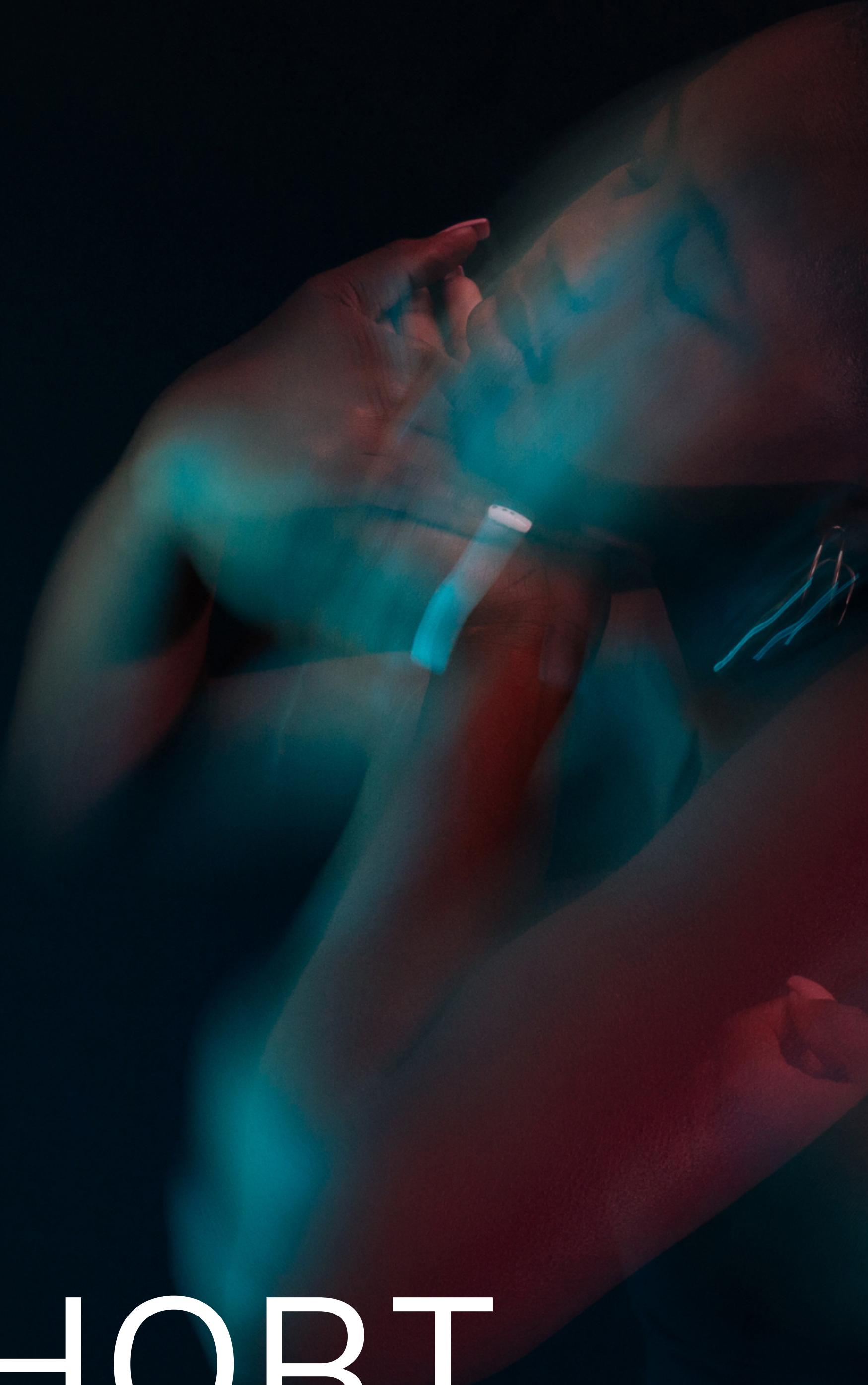
I reply, yes.

It shuts down and never opens its mouth again
As I crawl back to my maker in the ascending smoke
That will pour down again when we condense in summer days.

Phenomenal

Her soul so fierce, her mind so strong, her heart so brave
You cannot beat her –
Her eyes stare crystal as Venus, her skin as coated with melanin
and bronze. Her hair as dark as charcoal
for it is needed for its lightening powers. Her whole being is a poem.
Words woven to carry souls into humankind's future.
Her spirit never falls off the balcony on a lonely cold night
Inhale the universe inside her skin
O, what an ennobled delightful goddess of love and beauty
She blossoms.
She is phenomenally a virtuous woman.

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AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE



SHORT STORIES





Ufuoma Bakporhe

Ufuoma is a Nigerian short story writer, novelist and developing screenwriter. Her debut novel, *Letters from an Imbecile*, was published in 2014 by Emotion Press when she was only 17 years old. Her works have appeared in *The Kalahari Review*, *African Writer*, *Punocracy*, *Mbari*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Jalada Africa*, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 2019 Awele Creative Trust Award. *The Girl with the 'Stache* tells the story of Gladys, a teenager battling with herself as she keenly follows the life of Omolara, a classmate who suffers from hirsutism and constant bullying by her peers. Gladys is also trying to understand and own her sexuality. This coming-of-age story explores the struggles of teenagers trying to fit in or accept themselves and their unique personality under the conditions in which they find themselves.

[Follow @ufuomabakporhe on Twitter](#)



The Girl With The 'Stache

The girl with the moustache lived two streets away from our house. Her parents christened her Omolara but everyone in the neighbourhood called her Stache, and so did all the students at school despite the persistent warnings from our teachers. We attended the same secondary school, which was nearby, but we never walked together. When we took the school bus, we never shared a word.

Stache was like a goldfish with no hiding place. Wherever she went, she became the topic of discussion. There was this one time my mother and I were at a supermarket, and Omolara and her mother were there too. I noticed the bizarre look in the eyes of other customers as she and her mother trolley by. It was the same look the students in school had whenever she walked by or entered a classroom or a hall. It was also the look I wore the first time I saw her. There was something in her eyes when she was looked at that way. Sometimes, it was that she cared about the thoughts people had about her; at other times, it was that she did not.

I always wondered how she truly felt whenever people spoke about her, like she was not a human with feelings, as though because she had a moustache almost as prominent as that of my late father's she had no right to be upset when people spoke about her and labelled her. I wondered how it must be for her walking with a woman's face and a man's visage.

On school mornings, while we took the bus, Stache would sit at the extreme end by the window, her ears plugged, oblivious of everyone. Sometimes, she would hold a notepad doodling something or maybe writing. I took particular interest in her, but I feared that if I approached her for a conversation, it was not going to turn out well. She was beautiful regardless. It was strange to see a girl just like me with a moustache yet, she looked graceful, like she didn't have any unusual features on her face. As though she was just like the rest of us.

A lot of my schoolmates jeered at her and alienated her. According to them, she was not normal. *How do you define normal?* I was always tempted to ask them, but I would shy away. It was not going to be easy being the only voice standing up against the bullying.

I remember the day Ogochukwu said in Omolara's hearing that it was possible her mother had committed a grievous sin while she was pregnant with her, and so she paid for it with the child in her womb. She had said it casually, like it did not matter, or that the person she spoke of had no feelings. It happened on the bus on the way from school. As usual, Omolara was sitting in the backseat of the bus. Ogochukwu and I, with some other girls I hardly spoke to, sat in seats in front of Omolara. The other girls cackled like chickens. It was hilarious to them. I hated it. It piqued me. *Why would anyone say such horrible things about someone they barely even knew?* It was despicable. I had just learnt the word. Despicable. So I used it on Ogochukwu.

"You know those words are unfair and this behaviour is despicable," I said.

"Keep being a bore. If it's not funny to you, it's funny to us," she riposted.

She eyed me like I was saying something meaningless and continued laughing with the other girls.

I turned to see the look on Omolara's face. She was plugged in as usual. I wondered if she heard those words. I believed she did, but she only pretended not to. While the girls laughed,

I took out my AirPods and plugged them in. Like her, I did not want to hear the horrible things the others had to say about her.

Ufuoma Bakporhe

Day after day, I longed to speak with Omolara; to get to know her, but each day ended with me failing to walk up to her to tell her that I believed she was brave. It was only a brave girl who would put up with all the foul things that were said about her every other day.

Like many others, I had only come to know that her name was Omolara on the day Mrs Adebanjo, the principal, called her out at assembly and, in front of everyone, said she was one of the best-behaved students. My admiration for her began to grow even more. Yet, something kept stopping me from walking up to her and saying hello. She was in the same class as I was but in a different arm. In an SS2 class of over a hundred students and four arms, two being science class arms and the other two being art classes, Stache was in Arm A of Arts while I was in Arm B of Science.

I watched her closely, keenly, like a birdwatcher watched birds. At times, I crept myself out, wondering if I was any different from the serial stalkers I watched on television. One Saturday, I found her Facebook page and I spent a good two and a half hours, going through her posts.

Omolara Salisu. Student at Grey Hill High, Lagos. Loves to read, draw and sing. Lives in Lagos, Nigeria. From Ondo, Nigeria.

That was her profile. I went through her posts, pictures and everything that she had put up. I checked everyone she was friends with. She had a thing for books and authors. She had a few book review posts. There were also beautiful artworks up. One caught my eye. An abstract — something strange yet appealing. She had beautiful pictures. With a slender face, chiselled cheekbones and deep brown eyes and hair so full, all I could see was beauty personified.

In a post, entitled “Becoming the Girl with the Moustache”, she wrote about accepting her hirsutism. It was a big word. I Googled it and there it was. Hirsutism pronounced HUR-soot-iz-um was a condition in women that results in excessive growth of hair in a male-like pattern on the face, chest and back caused by the presence of excess male hormones in women, primarily the testosterone. *How in the world was I the best student in Biology since SS1 and I had no idea what hirsutism was?* I felt terrible. Stache was struggling with a condition many of us girls back in Grey Hill High did not know about or understand and yet, she was treated day in day out as an outcast.

In her post, I read her raw, honest words about dropping the razor and no longer shaving off her moustache because it was a part of who she was, and she was no longer ashamed of it.

I knew then that the other girls in school and I were nothing like Omolara. We were not brave. We were not honest. We were not accepting of who we truly were. Since junior school, I had been in a relationship with Jasper, who was now the Senior Prefect, but I knew that Jasper — or any other boy — was not who I wanted to be with. There was a different kind of energy I felt when I was with girls, but unlike Omolara Salisu AKA Stache, I was not proud to own who I really was. Perhaps, it was why I was drawn to her. I admired her strength and her valour. She was not afraid to show the world her insecurities or what they considered her abnormalities. I did not understand why I felt the way I felt about Stache until I spent those two hours and thirty minutes of my life on her Facebook wall.

I was not alone in this fear of the unknown and longing for acceptance. It was the same for Ogochukwu, my best friend who was also sometimes my worst enemy. Ogochukwu was not always the mean girl. When her family broke apart, the fear of people knowing she was from a broken home led to her putting up a wall. Now, I wonder if she felt Stache had bigger problems than she did just because she had a moustache on her face, and this gave her the license to make jest of her.

Meanwhile, Ogochukwu actually feared being alone and being taunted as the girl whose father left her mother for an older, wealthier woman. I watched this metamorphosis take place as we turned seven, then eight, then ten and now, fifteen. The story Ogochukwu told all who cared to listen was that her father had died. She would narrate a well-detailed death story that even I, sometimes, believed. I wished she would allow herself to be vulnerable. Maybe then, she would learn empathy.

After that day-in-the-life of Stache through her Facebook wall, I understood that life was not always black or white. Sometimes, there were grey lines between. Through her eyes, I learnt that we all deserved some kindness. So, I decided to meet Stache and introduce myself to her and tell her I admired her, well, without sounding like a stalker.

It was the weekend, so I had to wait until Monday to see her and to say everything I longed to tell her. About how beautiful she was and how brave I believed her to be. I had spent the rest of the weekend rehearsing the right words to say.

"Hi, Omolara. My name is Gladys. Gladys Okonkwo."

In my practice, I imagined that she would reply and angrily so, "I know who you are. You are Jasper's girlfriend and also friends with that mean girl, Ogochukwu. What do you want from me?"

I cleared the thought and came up with something else. She would smile at me, her dimples would stand out, and she would tell me it was nice to meet me. We would talk on and on, laugh, play, and get to know each other without talking about her moustache. She would feel normal. Okay. Beautiful. She would not be reminded of the bullies she had to endure, and she would have consolation in the fact that someone saw her as normal because that was who she was.

On Sunday night, I had a dream about her. She felt so real.

"You're beautiful," I told her.

She smiled, flashing a lovely set of teeth.

"I don't hear that often," she said.

"I know."

We were quiet for a moment. I watched her closely. Keenly. Passionately.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"How does what feel?"

"Having people see you like you are someone... something different?"

Her face brightened.

"Different isn't a bad thing now, is it?" she said. She had a point. "People fear what they don't understand. You just have to own who you are. That's what I do."

Her words rang like a bell in my head. *Own who you are. Own who you are.* "I like you," I told her.

Ufuoma Bakporhe

"Then why do you stay away, Gladys?"

I took the bus that morning and went to the backseat where she usually sits. She was not there. The tightness in my stomach returned.

At assembly, the news came.

"Students," Mrs Adebajo addressed us. "I have some bad news."

The tightness returned.

"One of us has painfully left us."

The tightness heightened.

"You all know Omolara Salisu, one of our brightest students."

There were loud mumbles from different ends. I felt the need to puke. Mrs Adebajo's voice faded away with a ringing sound in my ears.

"She has left us to be with the Lord."

That was it. My body gave way to the ground and I hit it hard. I could not remember what happened next. I opened my eyes to a whirling fan in the ceiling. Looking around, I realised I was in the sickbay. The nurse walked up to me. "Gladys, you are awake. You had everyone worried. How are you feeling?"

All I wanted to know was what happened to Omolara. "What happened to her?" I asked.

"Who?" the nurse asked, confused.

"Omolara. The student who died."

The nurse shakes her head mournfully. "Sickle cell. She died on Saturday."

I began to cry. She consoled me, asking if we were friends. I wish I had the right answers to that question. I wish I could say yes confidently, but all I knew about Omolara were from words I read off her Facebook page. I shook my head. She asked me to lie down so I could rest. "Your mother would come pick you soon. We've called her."

I did not really pay attention to her. All I could think about was how Omolara was dying while I stalked her Facebook. It was how I never had the courage to tell her how I felt or to be kind to her. It was how I could never protect her against the harsh words and the judging eyes that were always up against her. I felt something. Guilt. I felt guilty.

While my mother drove us home, worried about why I had fainted and she had to be called, I thought only about Stache.

"Do you know their daughter died? The one who goes to school with me," I said, as we drove past Stache's house. I made sure not to describe her as the girl with the moustache.

"The nurse mentioned to me. That's very sad. Were you two close?"

She made a right turn into the street leading to ours.

"No, Mummy. We weren't."

"Let's get you home so you can eat something."

"I wish we were," I said.

"What?"

"I wish we had been close. Me and Omolara."

"Was that her name? And, it's Omolara and I."

Was. My mother said was. I ignored her correction. This was no time for grammar lessons.

"Yes. Omolara is her name."

She smiled wryly. "She's resting now," she said. "That's what matters."

I piqued at how casual my mother felt about her death. She had no idea how much Omolara meant to me. She had no idea that she was a source of hope for me. That she made me believe I could also own what I was feeling. This person that I was. Unknown to my mother, deep down, I was attracted to Omolara.

Omolara felt like my soulmate. Like she was a part of me I had to live with. To live for. Like she was meant to be a light to me. And when she died, it felt like those two hours and a half I spent in the pages of her Facebook and the dream about us were a forever we both shared. It felt like I had known her all my life.

We pulled up in the driveway.

"I have something to tell you, Mummy," I said to her.

She looked at me, worried, wondering what secrets I had to tell.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, Mummy. There's just something about me that you need to know."

She was curious now. "Okay. Let's go in and then you can tell me everything."

As we walked into the house, she was all I could think about. Her flashing smile, her bold words to me and her confidence that filled a room. I was assured that she would have wanted me to be this courageous and to be, like Shakespeare said, true to myself. In that moment, I heard her voice softly saying to me, *own who you are*.

"Come sweetie, tell me everything," Mummy's voice cut in.



Niall Hurley

Niall is a South African writer who spent some of his early childhood in Ireland. Two of his poems were featured in the first issue of *The Journal of African Youth Literature*. He has also been published in the *Best New African Poets: 2016 Anthology*. Niall lives in Johannesburg and works as a User Experience writer.

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Down by The Vlei

No one from school ever walked home with Shawn. People said it was because he was strange, but Shawn knew it was because of the vlei-crocodiles.

The Vlei was the languid, reed-choked stream that bisected Shawn's suburb of Grasrand. In the dry winter months, it was less a capillary of the Vaal River and more a varicose vein. There were quicker ways home than to walk alongside it, but none better as far as Shawn was concerned – especially on Fridays. Fridays were magical, no-homework days.

He was hurling stones at vlei-eagles (otherwise experienced as hadedas) on one such wintery Friday when a noise scaled the walls of his make-believe world. He stopped mid-throw to listen to it. It was a sad sound – like crying, but worse. *Sobbing?* Yes, he thought that was what Miss Felix had called it.

Stop sobbing Shawn. There, there... it'll be OK.

His eyes darted up, down and across like little green searchlights. His ears couldn't quite tell him which direction to look in; the crying sound was too fluid, mixing with the rustling of the reeds. He wasn't completely sure if it was being made by a person; it sounded wrong somehow. *Unnatural?* Yes, that was one he'd learnt from his mother.

Spending so much time alone. Talking to yourself. It's unnatural for a boy your age.

Of course, it had to be a person's voice; only people could sob. But then where were they? He couldn't see anyone around. And there was nowhere to hide, unless they were hiding *inside* The Vlei. Just then a loud shrieking wail rang out, sending a flock of wagtails flapping and screeching into the pale-blue sky. Shawn followed their example and raced home to his mother, his un-tucked shirt billowing out behind him like a tail of his own.

'I don't have time for your games right now, okay Shawn?' His mother was hunched over a pile of soapy dishes.

'I'm not playing Mom! I think I heard a *ghost* – crying – at The Vlei. Come see!'

'At The Vlei? Shawn. It's bad enough you wasting my time *here*, but now you expect me to trek all the way up *there*. I'm sorry my boy, but I—'

'But you're not listening to me mom. I heard—'

'You *heard* me say I'm not going down there.'

'But—'

'But nothing, Shawn! Listen here: I clean. I cook. I buy you things. And not a word of thanks. Fine. But why do you have to make up stories to scare yourself, on top of everything else?' Shawn made no reply. 'Enough now. Please. Go play with your friends.'

'But I don't have any friends.'

'Imagine some if you're too fucked-up to make any real ones.' She punctuated this with the sharp click of her tongue, never once looking up from the sink.

Niall Hurley

Shawn was stung. But his grandmother was right when she had said things didn't hurt so much after they had happened to you a few times. He used to cry when he stepped on a bee or when his mother said mean things to him. Now he just winced, pulled out the stinger and went on his way.

Shawn's breath grew steamier the closer he got to The Vlei. He wondered whether ghosts got cold, and whether the one from yesterday would be there again so early on a Saturday. He needed to find out. He needed to prove that it wasn't imaginary. And he knew that for that to happen, he would have to see The Vlei as it really was.

It wouldn't be easy. He'd worked hard on his version, building on it since Grade Two when he'd first started walking to and from Grasrand Primary. And that was a lifetime ago; he was already in Grade Three. But he was tired of no one taking him seriously. So, standing at the edge of the Vlei's small bank in black rubber boots and a blue matching tracksuit, Shawn Quinton Hendricks closed his eyes and emptied his mind. When he opened them again, it happened.

A din of bizarre sounds subsided, then died; rich smells diffused into nothingness; colours inconceivable washed away. Only a yellow-brown stillness remained, like the unstarted page of a colouring book. Shawn didn't like it. He didn't like how the willow trees weren't whispering secret messages to each other anymore, or how the king's castle had been reduced to a public toilet block, nor how the goblin caves had become stormwater drains. But then it didn't matter; he could hear the voice.

He hopped down The Vlei's small embankment into ankle-deep water, eager to get closer to it – to whoever, or whatever, owned it. It was crying again. But it sounded even stranger this time. *Scratchier*, he thought. The more he listened to it, the more it reminded him of the time he'd got tonsillitis. He wondered if ghosts could get tonsillitis.

'Only one way to find out,' he whispered to himself. It felt like the right thing to say. He took a moment to steel himself and then set off to trace the voice, scanning the Vlei's tangled mess of reeds as he went.

It was slow going, made slower still by figments of his imagination that kept trying to force their way back into the world. At one point, a monster with a cavernous mouth leapt across his path; he had to remind himself that it was only really a frog. Focus, he thought – another word he'd learnt from Miss Felix.

Things would be so much better for you, if you could just learn to focus, Shawn!

So he soldiered on, determined and alone in a dank corridor of reeds. Alone that was, but for a miserable voice that rose and fell, from loud groans to whimpers that were barely audible over the squelching of his boots. And then, just as he felt he was getting close to it, the voice stopped. Shawn froze. It felt as if the clay-like muck beneath his feet had suddenly set hard, trapping him. Had it noticed him? Was it hiding?

'Help,' something croaked. 'Please... help.' It could have come from the reeds to his left but he didn't want to look. Instead, he squeezed his eyes shut and wished himself away. When he opened them this time, nothing had changed.

Shawn set his gaze firmly on the stagnant water around his boots. Tiny clouds of breath puffed out from him in locomotive rhythm. Nothing more from the voice. Good. Maybe it had left. Maybe he'd imagined it. Then the water rippled. He knew he hadn't caused it; he hadn't moved an inch. Another ripple. His steam-train breath sped up.

A hand shot out and gripped his ankle. He screamed a silent scream, hoping desperately that his feet would come free from the muck and whatever it was that held him. They did. He slipped once, twice and then scrambled up the bank, not daring to look back. He could hardly breathe for fear, yet he ran home faster than he would run again in all his life.

The filthy mark of the thing from The Vlei was still on him as he searched the house for his mother. ‘Mom! Mommy! The Ghost! Mom!’ he ran – half-crying, half-shouting – up the stairs and paused at her bedroom door. She shoved a pill container into the pocket of her gown and picked up her lipliner, before speaking to him through the reflection of her dressing table mirror.

‘What’s the matter hey, my—’ Now she turned to look at him, taking the lipliner away from her face, ‘oh, Shawn! Look at yourself. You’re a mess. It’ll be all over the house now! Really Shawn, you don’t think.’

‘Sorry Mom, but you have to come see,’ he said as if it were all one word. ‘The ghost, Mom! It touched me. And it spoke to me. I think we need to go back there and—’ He was still trying to catch his breath.

‘It spoke to you, hey? I wish it had told you to take your boots off before coming inside.’ She had taken up her lipliner again and added, half to herself, ‘Would be nice if you made a friend like that.’

‘Mom, it’s not my friend. It’s a ghost! And it’s *real*. It touched my leg. Look!’ He pointed at his left boot, ankle-height. His mother gave him a quick glance through the mirror.

‘And what exactly am I supposed to be looking at? You got that crap all over you. I can see that for sure! Now go and wash up. Please, Shawn.’

‘You not looking properly. I just want you to come see,’ Shawn pleaded.

‘And you not listening properly.’ His mother turned on her dresser-stool to face him straight-on, ‘It’s like talking to a brick wall with you sometimes. Now stop distracting me and for the last time, go clean yourself up. Mommy’s busy.’

Shawn left the room without saying anything else. *Maybe she’d heard it too*, he supposed. *Maybe she’s scared*. His mother always got mean when she was scared. He decided to spend the rest of the day, out of her way, watching TV. Nothing could grab at him in the snug warmth of the lounge.

When Shawn looked outside his bedroom window, he found the early morning draped in a white, perforated sheet. But it wasn’t snow. It was never snow. He put on his unwashed tracksuit and rubber boots, and then scratched around his drawers in search of gloves. The noise reached his mother at the end of the passage.

Normally, she’d still have been asleep. But she was worried about her son. He’d been acting strange, even by his standards. She’d heard him talking to himself the night before. That in itself wasn’t unusual, but there was something unnerving about the hushed tones he’d used. Something *conspiratorial*? Yes, that was the word. And then there was the handprint on his boot. She’d pretended she’d hadn’t noticed it because she didn’t like to encourage him. But she had noticed it. It had looked too big to be Shawn’s. But then, she supposed, he was a growing boy.

Niall Hurley

She suspected he was getting ready to go off to the damned Vlei again, on what was surely the coldest day of the year. And, she suspected, he was trying to be sneaky about it too. As if on cue, she heard the front door click open, and then quietly shut. No time to get properly dressed then, not if she was going to see what her boy was up to.

It wasn't long before Shawn was at the scene of his encounter the day before. The sun shone upon the yellow-white Vlei in heatless rays. But there was no moaning or wailing now. No reeds rustled; no water rippled. There was a new smell though. It smelt like pain and despair and rotten mince.

He knew his mom wasn't far behind. The rattling of the pillbox in her gown pocket had given her away. But she thought she was being sneaky, so he pretended not to notice that she was following him. He was glad she was coming but worried that he'd have nothing to show her. What was keeping Angie?

Shawn's mother spied him through a gap in the reeds.

'Shawn, over here! It's me. Time to come home, my boy. C'mon.' Shawn turned towards her and made a slow beckoning gesture, saying nothing. She didn't like that gesture one bit, but felt compelled to obey. 'Fine then,' she said under her breath, 'I'll come fetch you.'

As she clambered gingerly down the Vlei's bank into the corridor of reeds, she was hit with the stench of the place.

'Ugh! What's that *smell!*?' There was a part of her that seemed to know exactly what it was. But she pushed the thought away. In response, Shawn only shrugged. 'What the hell are you doing down here, Shawn? Are you alone?'

'You don't have to whisper, Mom.'

'Oh. Didn't realise I... let's go back home hey, sweetie?'

'Not yet please, Mommy. I want you to see.'

'See what, Shawn? I've seen The Vlei before. Come, I'll make us some brekkie before church.'

'But I think she's finally here. It's like you said, Mom: people are just slow starters on a Sunday.'

'What? She? Who, Shawn? There's no one here. I want to go now please. Come on.'

'If there's no one here Mom, why you still whispering?'

Shawn's mother looked down at her feet as if to find an answer there. When she looked up, she saw a womanly figure like a photo in negative standing behind her son. She stepped backwards and slipped onto The Vlei's marshy floor.

'Christ, Shawn. Behind you!' Now the shadow-thing had its hands on his shoulders.

'It's okay Mom,' Shawn replied, full of cheer. 'Angie visited me last night. While you was sleeping. I wish she came before but it doesn't matter 'cos we friends now. And she's not even imaginary. Cool-hey?'

Shawn thought his mother looked like she was going to be sick. He wasn't sure if he liked that, but he knew that he liked how he had her attention. Now she was listening. Now she had time. He watched on as she struggled to her feet, her dressing gown streaked with vlei-mud.

'Who... are you?' Shawn's mother bleated at the shadow-thing, not knowing if it would respond, if it could respond. For a moment, it did nothing. Then it flicked an ethereal finger at a nearby thicket of reeds. The thicket separated down the middle and revealed a woman's soggy, grey corpse. Its neck was bent in a way that seemed... unnatural.

'Oh-god-no. No. Shawn, come here. We need to g—' The shadow-thing put its finger to where its lips might have been.

'Angie says you need to shut up and listen for a change.' Shawn's voice was toneless now. His mother gulped. Two translucent eyes flicked in her direction, and a great gust of wind was sent rushing upon her. A piece of paper slapped against her face and got caught there. She peeled it off.

'She wants you to read it, Mom. Out loud.' And so she did:

ing Persons

Angela Buthelezi

Age: 29

Appearance: Medium height, slim build, brown hair,

brown eyes

Last seen Ruby Resort & Casino, Vaal River

The last part she said in a low hush. Ruby Resort and Casino was just on the edge of town. She looked up at the spectre of Miss Buthelezi, unbelieving. It still had its hands on him.

'Angie says you could have saved her. She said you had two chances to save her. Do you know what she means, Mom?' His mother could only stare, aghast. Then Shawn and the thing he called Angie both made to turn, and panic brought her back.

'Just come over here. Please Shawn! We'll come back just now, okay?'

'Angie says you're lying. She says lying is what'll get you face down in a puddle, choking on swamp water.' His mother whimpered, then began to cry. 'Angie says crying doesn't help anything. She's going now. She says she's taking me with unless you can give her a good reason why not... and she doesn't think you can.'

'What? Take you? No! This is crazy. She can't! You're coming with me.'

'But there's no friends for me back there. No real ones. Angie says I'll make lots where she's going.' A thin but genuine smile spread across his otherwise lineless face.

His mother dropped to her knees. 'Help! She's trying to take him...' Her voice trailed off, '...help me.'

There was no one around to hear her. It sounded like the spectre clicked its tongue, and Shawn spoke for it once more: 'Angie says it's time to go now. She knows how busy you are.'

'No. WAIT! Don't! Tell me what you want. Just don't take him. Please!' Shawn looked up into the empty face behind his shoulder and then back at his mother with furrowed brows.

Niall Hurley

'Angie says she doesn't like repeating herself. She says it's a simple question: why shouldn't she take me with her?' A moment's pause from his mother and then her face turned from white to red.

'You can't take him,' she insisted. She shot up and marched towards them. But as soon as she got within touching distance, she was knocked back a step by some invisible force. For a half-second she couldn't understand what had happened. Then she looked up at Angie – at *the ghost*. It shook its head. She glared at it, and then roared, 'HE'S MINE!' Shawn sighed.

'Angie says: "wrong answer."

Shawn moved to stand by Angie's side. She held his hand. The two of them turned away from his mother and began to walk down the Vlei's reedy corridor, only Shawn's feet splashing in the water.

'No, this isn't happening. This can't be hap—' Shawn looked behind him and cut her off.

'You still don't believe me, Mom?'

'No-no-wait! That's not what I meant. What must I do? Just tell me WHAT TO DO!'

'You should've come seen.'

A foul wind swept across The Vlei. Shawn's mother let out a terrible, animal scream. The reeds hissed. And they were gone.



Stephen Swai

Stephen Swai is an aspiring writer from Tanzania, now based in Dar es Salaam. His works have appeared in newspapers in Malaysia, Brazil and the Netherlands, and in online literary publications like *The Kalahari Review*.

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The Girl Who Played Rede

|

At the age of seven, the boy met the girl who would change his life.

Just after finishing kindergarten, his parents enrolled him at Mwembeni Primary School.

Contrary to its name, the school didn't have a single mango tree to be found in its sprawling sandy grounds, just pine trees whose wheezing songs created a condition in pupils that was known as *buzzing ears*.

The school was even more peculiar for the dust devils that roamed its grounds, wrapping the buildings in a fog of dust every afternoon after lunch break.

Upon being placed in Class C, the skinny boy had developed the habit of hiding behind the toilet during handwriting class, after he received a whooping for the chicken scratch he turned in.

When the other kids started telling the teachers that he was hiding in the toilet, the boy decided it was time to stay away from school during handwriting class.

He was attracted by the dumpster on his way to school, where discarded condoms, some filled with alabaster liquid, were strewn around with an effrontery that made Sister Maria, a despotic nun who ran the only kindergarten school in the entire district, cross herself after passing that sickening place.

Upon closer inspection, the boy saw that the prophylactic weapons could be put to good use. He peeled the elastic bands from the condoms. He took small pieces of paper, folded them, and bent them in the middle. He affixed the folded pieces of paper to the elastic band, spread between his thumb and index finger, then pulled it back, palm facing outward. Upon release, the catapult would send the piece of folded paper flying.

For the classes that he attended, sitting at the back of the class, the boy would take aim at the napes of the kids in front; he would feign innocence when his victims turned around, pretending that his attention was directed to the whizzing pines. The boy always looked innocent, because his eyes had the expression of a scared cat.

When the rascal disturbed the girls with his catapult, he thought about the boy who herded his father's cows, who was adept in matters of slingshots. Every evening, he would come back with a bird he had taken down. "I fed a big pigeon to the dog today," he would boast.

The boy, who liked the idea of shooting down birds that danced on telephone lines, was quick to admit to himself that he lacked the skill for it, after he had once launched a stone into his own face using the herder's catapult.

For that reason, the boy abandoned his catapult and dedicated his time away from the handwriting class to building bird nests. He used Velcro-like plants he had seen around the school, and after imitating the work of weavers, he placed his finest nests in a bush near the school, with the hope of attracting birds.

His optimism was held together by the excitement of possibly finding eggs, but was shattered after weeks of waiting. He didn't have a choice but to succumb to the conclusion that was best summed up a line that crossed his mind, "Maybe they don't want nests to be woven for them."

The following day, when a film of dust in the air made him languid, he dissolved his nest-making business and hopped onto another idea, whose spontaneous origin sprang upon him when he was watching a group of girls playing rede, a game like dodgeball.

He knew at that moment that he would move into another adventure, one of stealing mathematical sets from girls playing rede.

II

Mathematical sets were a requirement for pupils of Standard Three and above. For boys, they were boring metal containers; for girls, they were more than just metal boxes with angles, half squares, rulers, pens and pencils. They were dolls, whose insides were decorated with fabric like pieces of kanga or vitenge, and perfumed with fragrances stolen from their mothers' chest of drawers.

Some girls would adorn them with dried flowers or embellish them with cut-out pictures of singers, actresses, and models they found in newspapers and magazines.

Mathematical sets were also secret troves for love letters, whose declarations were both naïve and universal; although each love letter was personal, each read like every other letter from other girls, in other schools, in other districts.

Rede was a game played by girls. Only girls.

There were two teams with equal numbers of players. Two members of the fielding team stood about ten meters apart, and their job was to eliminate the members of the dodging team with a ball about the size of a tennis ball, made of a sock stuffed with pieces of old clothing.

The dodging team sent one member at a time to the middle of the court, with two objectives: to dodge the ball and fill an empty soda bottle—mostly Mirinda or Coca Cola—with sand using her palms; the bottle was placed in the middle of the court.

To fill the bottle, the dodger had to catch the ball and throw it away, or wait for one of the fielders to commit a bad throw: the ball not landing in the hands of the other field.

With every filled bottle, the dodger saved an eliminated teammate; after all the dodgers were eliminated, the fielders became the dodgers.

III

The boy decided to steal mathematical sets from the girls playing rede because during these moments, their schoolbags, some knitted and others bought from Arab shops, were piled together a few meters away and unattended.

Rede was like tennis. While everyone was spellbound by the ball and the dancing dodger, the boy's strategy was to sit close to the pile like an innocent spectator. With the swift precision of a pelican, he would draw a mathematical set from the bag.

² The boy couldn't take the sets home: his father checked his schoolbags regularly and he would draw a stick from the pile he stored under his bed and start the beating if he chanced upon an item that didn't belong to his son.

The boy wished that his father was like Aboubakari's father; Aboubakari had once gone to school for an entire month with a bag filled with pebbles, sticks, and empty cigarette packs.

Stephen Swai

The following day, when a film of dust in the air made him languid, he dissolved his nest-mSo he decided to hide them in the small graves he dug in an empty farm near the condom dumpster.

After a streak of stealing without being apprehended, the scraggy boy came to two conclusions: either he was very good at stealing, or he had luck on his side. The latter made him recite a prayer before and after stealing.

This was how the boy saw the girl.

IV

She was different from the rest, with the skin that appeared to have been dipped in honey and warmed by the morning sun. Her slender body was hugged by a white shirt and a blue skirt with two flaps for tying a bow at the back.

When he saw her dodging, he experienced a pounding in his chest that for a brief moment made him forget stealing: her flitting skirt tugged by her serpentine waist, her arms guiding her body like a music conductor, her gaze focused on the ball that chased her like a bull after a matador. He was entranced.

He didn't know how long he was under her spell before he quickly drew a mathematical set from one of the bags and walked away, hiding it inside his shirt.

He took shelter fifty meters away beneath the only eucalyptus tree in school, a tree whose legend excited the pupils. It was said that on Fridays, evil spirits cooked biryani there, and based on the aroma, the pupils would say, "Today, they have used too many cloves,"

"Today, too much cinnamon," or even, "Too much cardamon." But when it was cooked to perfection, they would sit in their classrooms and quietly savour the imaginary biryani. That afternoon when the bell ended recess, the girls picked up their bags to go back to class. The beautiful girl opened hers to put the ball in it. She must have noticed that something was wrong, because she emptied its contents on the sand. The boy knew what she was looking for.

She started crying. Her friends gathered around her.

For the first time, the boy experienced self-condemnation and a feeling that kneaded his heart. Keeping his distance, he followed the crying girl, who was flanked by a throng of friends trying to console her.

For the rest of the afternoon, the skinny boy was haunted by pangs of guilt, as the image of the crying girl lingered in his mind. When school was dismissed, he went and stood near her class. When she came out, her eyes were puffy. After she had bid her friends goodbye and started walking home, the boy followed her. He pursued her through a narrow path, between the fields belonging to the school where the pupils cultivated and harvested corns and beans.

They ascended a small hill via a road that rolled between two boulders with graffiti on them that said Socialism and Self-Sufficiency, and home to a madman by the name of Ticha who, years before, was the headmaster of the school. He was screaming, "Nyerere is dead! Bring the coffin!" The man he was proclaiming to be dead was very much still alive.

After the rocks, the road descended toward a rustic, small hamlet of chaotic mud houses that populated the expanse like mushrooms whose corroded roofs failed to illuminate life.

The girl walked into a rectangular house with a rusty roof, built with mud bricks and plastered haphazardly with cement which was falling off around the door and window frames.

She left her shoes on a sisal sack that served as the welcome mat and disappeared into the house. The boy, who was hiding behind a mango tree, noted the discrepancy between the beautiful girl and the house that spoke of hardship; he felt even guiltier for stealing her mathematical set.

As he was about to leave, the front door opened. She came out wearing a red blouse and green skirt. She went to the chicken coop that stood close to the toilet, built with sticks and without roofing. A man's shirt, torn at the back, and a trouser mended with patches hung on the washing line suspended between two trees in front of the house.

The girl came out of the chicken coop with a rope and started skipping, with the elegance of a seasoned ballerina, each bounce sending her small chest heaving, her skirt flapping, her head bobbing, Ta! Ta! Ta! Ta!

A few minutes later, a voice came from inside the house. Katarina! Katarina! She went in: the boy left.

On his way home he passed through the socialism rocks; the madman was sleeping. The boy made the decision to return the mathematical set to its rightful owner, and vowed not to steal again. He trembled with trepidation at the thought of Katarina having a stern father like his, who would punish her.

He was so remorseful that when he got home, he was covered in a blanket of sorrow, and he went directly to sleep with regret weighing on his eyelids.

It was only when he woke up in the middle of the night when he realized that the mathematical set was still in his possession. He was lucky that his father hadn't checked his bag. So while everyone was sleeping, he retrieved it carefully with the help of the dim light emitted by the lantern.

From outside, it looked like other mathematical sets he had stolen before. The smell of lavender attacked his nostrils when he opened it; cut-outs of flowers and butterflies were glued to the inside of the cover. He removed a red piece of cloth and permitted his eyes to inspect each item.

He went through every item carefully: angles, half squares, rulers, pens, and pencils. At the bottom, he found a piece of paper. It was a letter penned in a beautiful cursive handwriting that belonged either to someone with a natural gift for forming letters, or someone in love. The letter was addressed to a boy by the name of James.

In the letter, the girl described James as tall and light-skinned, with thick calves and round, inquisitive eyes that were tinged with sleepiness. She watched him during recess, as he threw himself in the pursuit of creating images on paper, and because he was so engrossed in his drawing, he wouldn't notice her.

She had spent enough time watching him draw that she had learned that he would bite his lower lip and snake his tongue over his upper lip, as if devouring the art he was fashioning with his pencil.

After reading the letter, the boy was seized with childish rage that made him want to kill this drawing boy with his own pencil and smear his work with his own blood.

Stephen Swai

V

The boy was on his way to school the following morning, the mathematical set tucked in his bag. After much thought, just as the roof of Mwembeni was rising from the horizon, he settled on a more tenable plan of returning the mathematical set.

After class, he followed the girl to her house again. She walked without looking back: she plucked some dried flowers along the way, and stuck them in her hair. On the boulders, the madman was lecturing about politics again, this time declaring that Nyerere had decided to return to the presidency.

When the girl entered the house, he walked up to the front porch, his heart somersaulting in his chest, his feet wobbly from fear. He placed the mathematical set on the welcome mat and walked away as quickly as he could without running.

In the mathematical set he had placed a letter, written in the best handwriting his hands could produce. He tried to appeal to her virtue of clemency by declaring his decision to stop stealing. And in a moment of absurdity, he revealed to her about the secret nest he had woven and placed in the bush near the school. As proof of her mercy, he asked her to write back and place her letter in the nest.

He wrote all this without revealing his identity, signing his letter as "The boy who seeks your forgiveness".

For the following few days, he checked the empty nest three times a day, and his faith started to wane. But just before the week was over, when he was about to give up and destroy the nest, he found a letter. He didn't open it until he reached home.

The letter was written in that handwriting he remembered. She was glad that he had given back what was not his to take in the first place. She commended him for deciding to abandon his thieving ways and used the last sentence to remind him that thieves would burn in the hellfire. He chuckled.

The boy was taken over by pure bliss. He spent the night tracing the letters with the fingers of his shaky hands, smelling and inspecting the paper as if it held more mystery than what was described in words.

And that was how the correspondence between the girl who played rede and the boy began, with the help of the nest he made that couldn't attract birds. He would place a letter, and she would pick it up, read it, and place her response.

He told her he was Chaga; she told him she was Gogo. He told her he wanted to visit Dar es Salaam; she told him she had an aunt who lived there.

With every letter he felt closer to her; he spent many hours at night rereading her letters. He looked for lavender flowers to put inside his letters. Once, he glued dead butterflies and pigeon feathers he had collected from the backyard to it.

Apart from writing her letters, he dedicated his time to watching her being fought over by other girls who wanted her to be on their rede teams.

Her body was so flexible that she could contort her elastic waist like a belly dancer, escaping the ball by centimetres. Her dodging was so elegant that she looked like a marionette springing from the ground.

She would vault from the ground and perform a mid-air split, the ball passing beneath her, and unlike other girls whose skirts would be caught by the ball, she knew how to tame hers.

Sometimes, she would elude the fielders by ducking to the ground like a redheaded agama, and with the stamina of a tennis player she could run back and forth without her lungs giving up on her.

And when she happened to finally catch the ball, she would throw it so far that she would save up to two eliminated teammates. Since she was so good, her team would normally put her at the end.

VI

After a month of correspondence, she finally told him it was time to meet: she couldn't keep up the pendulum of perfumed words on paper. He reluctantly agreed because he had lied to her about how he looked.

He had painted an image of a tall boy with round eyes, who liked to draw, although his hands hadn't allowed him to produce a masterpiece as of yet.² He boasted that he had calves destined for football, although he didn't play because he believed it to be a lowly destination for someone with a bright future like his.³

Afraid of losing her correspondence, and her altogether,⁵ he wrote her confirming their rendezvous at the intersection of Magereza and Polisi Road on the Saturday of August 24 at ten in the morning. In that short letter, he said that he would be wearing red shoes, standing at the embankment of the small bridge at the intersection.

The boy chose that specific point because it was the place where he had the least chance of running into his father, who owned a shop on the other side of town.⁶

The boy had also developed a fascination with intersections where four roads came together and then went their separate ways. In fact, peculiar to his way of thinking, he believed intersections were conversation points where roads sought to talk to each other about what they had carried, and when no one was around, he would lower his ear and try to listen to the murmurs of their conversations.

As the day neared, the thought of finally meeting Katarina sowed a seed of fear that manifested in tormenting waves of jitters. In that heightened state of distress, he even contemplated penning another letter cancelling their planned meetup, with a lie of sickness. However, he contemplated for too long and he ended up not writing at all.

VII

The big day came. It was Saturday. He woke up at seven in the morning. The queet-queet of the red-billed firefinch, which he normally found pleasing to his ears, didn't assuage his anxieties that morning: he was scared.

While he was pondering about the meeting, the boy ended up drifting off. He woke up again at ten. He was late. He dressed up quickly and left without even telling his mother, who was in the kitchen, where he was going.

Sweat soiled his shirt as he jogged. He was no longer worried about not looking like the boy he had described, but of being late enough to find her gone.⁷

When the intersection rose from the distance, he saw her; she was standing at the embankment where he was supposed to be. She was wearing a floral gown. She looked beautiful.

Stephen Swai

Just as she turned her head, she saw the boy, who was wearing his red shoes, approaching from the other side of the intersection; she squinted her eyes. She got off the embankment and studied the boy's shoes, and when she looked back at the boy's face, she was wearing an uncertain expression on her face.

He waved his hand like someone unsure of what he was doing when he saw she wasn't moving. After what seemed like an eternity, she started walking toward him.

The only thing she saw was the boy's face contorting into something that looked like horror; it was too late.

Everything happened so fast. A pool of people was gathering around a limp body lying beside a brown Land Cruiser J60. The boy couldn't move his legs. The last thing he saw before they carried her to the back of the car was two women covering their faces with their kangas.

VIII

The following Monday morning, during the morning assembly, he was jerked back to reality when they announced that a pupil from Standard Two by the name of Katarina Masunga had passed away on Saturday, after a car accident.

His heart choked on its own blood. Everything became slower and the voices sounded distant. The news sucked the power from his limbs and he experienced a sharp blow to his gut. Years later, he would remember that feeling after a girl punched him in the stomach.

It didn't take long for the air to be suffocated by cries of girls who knew her and those who didn't but still cried because others were crying. Boys who had learned masculinity from their fathers lowered their heads, some trying to find out who she was in murmurs. Mwembeni was such a big school that some of the kids would remain unknown even after their graduation.

His state of denial was only allowed a few seconds of existence before being shattered by the announcing teacher holding up a framed photo of Katarina. She announced that the burial would take place that same day, at four in the afternoon, at the district cemetery.

"There won't be afternoon classes, so we can all go and pay our last respects."

It is your fault. His guilty conscience rolled over him in endless waves in class that morning. He couldn't go to the cemetery when school was dismissed. When his mother saw him that afternoon, she rushed to the kitchen for the first aid kit.

The skinny boy, whose mouth had taken on the taste of bile, succumbed to such a strong feverish spell that his parents had to rush him to the nearby Catholic clinic.

"He doesn't have malaria. I can't say where he gets such a temperature," said the doctor who walked like a crow, and possessed a pair of tarry pupils, a pointy mouth, and a head that had a tendency to bob. He frightened the boy so much that the mere thought of seeing him had caused a miraculous recovery in the boy on previous sickly occasions. However, that day, his demeanour couldn't heal the boy.

He prescribed him some medication to lower the fever. "Make sure that he gets enough rest and drinks a lot of water," he said, his voice trailing behind his fluttering hospital gown as he disappeared in that crowish walk of his.

Just as she turned her head, she saw the boy, who was wearing his red shoes, approaching

For one week, the boy didn't go to school. The boy's father would walk into the boy's room and hold his small hand, barking orders to his wife like, "Make sure you slaughter that chicken for the soup. Later you should take him out so he can get some sun. Make sure he drinks enough water!"

The father's concern filled the boy with dissonance; the boy had come to know his father as a monster who could make him sleep in the dog kennel at three in the morning if he didn't take a shower.

10

It would be a week when his father finally took him to school.

IX

For weeks, the boy kept on going to her house after class. He would hide behind the mango tree, looking for someone who wasn't there. When he closed his eyes, the front porch was transformed, and he saw her skipping rope.

Three weeks in, he got caught. He wasn't petrified; he didn't run. He could tell that it was her father by the smoky voice tinged with sorrow, that asked, "What are you doing here?"

Her father's face seemed to have aged, not from years, but grief. His eyes were those of a man who cried, although he didn't want to show it.

They stood looking at each other, and finally the man said, "You have sad eyes. Did you know Katarina?" The boy couldn't speak, but his tears did. He crashed into the man and sobbed for the first time since Katarina's death. Standing like two melancholy pillars, they embraced each other, joined together by their common grief.

When the boy separated himself from the man, he realized that the man was also crying. Silently. Rivulets flowed down his face.

That was the last time he went to the girl's house. It would be many years later when he would bump into Katarina's father on the road, dishevelled and talking to himself. Initially, the boy thought it was Ticha, but he remembered that Ticha had already passed away. When the boy finally recognized the man, he greeted him, but the man looked at the tall boy for a long time, and then walked away.

The boy's solitude agitated his mother, but after several fruitless efforts to find its cause, she decided to leave him in peace. However, she started packing him a lunchbox; he couldn't eat it to the delight of the dumpster. His father couldn't be bothered by his wife's concerns. He attributed the change in the boy to the normal growth among boys his age.

Even after her death, Katarina continued appearing in the boy's dreams. Sometimes, she was playing rede with her friends, and other times she was running in a maze. In the last dream he had of her, she was standing at the intersection of Magereza and Polisi. She crossed the road to the side he was on, and she told him, "Let go!"

The following day, instead of going to school, he went to the cemetery in a soporific state, pulled by a power he couldn't resist. Beneath an Australian¹²pine tree that sang in the wind, her grave stood fresher than the rest, covered with dried hibiscuses, sunflowers, bougainvillea, yellow bells, oleander, poinsettias, and other flowers whose names he didn't know. They all looked the same in their wilted state.

He didn't cry. The only feeling that washed over him was that of weight being lifted off his shoulders. He knew that he would be carrying the sadness for the rest of his life; it was one with him.

Stephen Swai

He spent the morning there, noticing things about the dead he didn't know before. The derelict place, with crosses like intersections in the air that were falling into the mouths of termites, told him that after death, one ceased to exist not just in life, but also in death. Although Katarina's cross was new, he knew it was only a matter of time before it was taken apart by its own death.

Before he left the cemetery, the boy wrote a letter and buried it in her grave. He told her he was sorry for killing her. He apologized for not attending her funeral, and he reassured her that her grave looked beautiful, and that even the dried flowers gave it a dignified look. He recounted how it had gotten drier ever since she had gone, to the point that the dust devils had decided to come out of the fields and started walking along the road with the rest of the people. He confessed that he didn't know what it felt like where she was, but he hoped that she was safe. He promised to visit her grave often.

X

The turning of the calendar slowly diminished his solitude; he could pass the cemetery without the stabbing in his chest that he had experienced before. Around this time, two major events happened to the boy.

The first one happened one Saturday when his father sent him to the hardware store to buy a hammer. Lost in his thoughts, the boy bumped into someone at the intersection of Magereza and Polisi. When he looked up, he saw artist's eyes on a long face.

"James," he called out impulsively. The stranger looked at him with curious eyes, trying to establish who he was. "Do we know each other?"

The boy said, "I don't remember where we met, but I feel as if I know you." The boy was honest, because at that moment, he was also trying to decipher how he knew the other boy's name without knowing who he was.

The stranger was startled. He asked the boy whether he was friends with his young brother; the boy shook his head.

For days, the boy tried to recall where he had met the stranger in vain. When he had finally forgotten the whole thing, and when he was watching a group of girls that used to play rede with Katarina, he remembered the letter in a mathematical set.

That afternoon, he continued watching the group of girls for a long time. Then the second event happened. He got up and walked up to them. They stopped playing, and without hesitation, he asked, "Can I play with you?"

The girls surrounded the skinny boy because they were unsure if they had heard him right. The boy stood rooted with a serious countenance, his eyes moving from one girl to the next. The girls looked at each other, then at the boy, and back to each other. Never before had they ever received such an unthinkable request. From a boy.

A long time passed before anyone said anything. Then, one of the girls broke the silence.



Lukhanyiso Nqeno

Lukhanyiso is a 25-year-old aspiring writer from South Africa who is currently working on her master's degree in Chemistry at Rhodes University. Despite her love for science, she has always been an avid reader with a passion for writing. She wrote short stories throughout her high school years, even co-writing a short film for her tenth-grade class on teenage pregnancy. However, university halted her writing as she felt it rather odd to be both a science student and a lover of the arts. She has, however, come to embrace the fact that people need not be defined by just one thing, which is something she loves to showcase in her writing.

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Not Today

We sat across each other in awkward silence for what felt like forever while he tried desperately to sort his thoughts into a sensible sentence. I sat silently across from him, absentmindedly running my hand across the menu, wishing I was anywhere but here. He had been dating my mother for about a year now, but we rarely interacted, mostly because I chose to keep my distance. I would kill for that carefully procured distance right now, but I was going to have to be civil with this man for the rest of my life, and there is no time like the present apparently. Don't get me wrong, he's nice enough; all of this was just a lot for me.

My father had passed away three years ago in a tragic car accident, it had all been so sudden and all at once my life was rear-ended. I'd be lying if I said I had in any way recovered from his loss. But my recovery, or lack thereof, doesn't matter because everyone else has moved on. My friends have grown tired of the sad girl with a dead dad, and my mom found someone else and was well on her way to making a whole new family of her own. I don't necessarily resent her for it; I want her to be happy. I'm just not entirely sure I want to be part of this brand new family of hers.

"Look Siyasamkela—" my mother's new man said slowly before pausing, still trying to rearrange his thoughts into a sentence that wouldn't piss me off. What he did not know was whatever he said would most probably rub me the wrong way anyway. A part of me felt somewhat sorry for him really. All he did was fall in love with a woman who had a rather sullen daughter who he had no choice but to deal with now. He would be okay though. Just a few more months, and I would be off to university, and neither one of them would have to deal with me anymore.

"I realize that this is probably a lot to take in for you."

I let out an exasperated breath and looked up from the menu I'd preoccupied myself warily, knowing very well that he had no idea how I felt.

"I'm not trying to replace your father," he continued, and I couldn't help but wonder if he and my mom had rehearsed these lines together. That sentence was word-for-word how my mother had phrased it. It was hard to hear them out when what they said they weren't doing felt exactly like they were in fact doing.

All my life, the only family I have ever known was my mom and my dad. My father's mother had passed away long before I was born, and his father was a deadbeat. My mother, on the other hand, did not necessarily get along with her family and, after various uncomfortable interactions with them, I understood why. All we had was each other, and that was more than enough for us. We were a perfectly happy little family, and then my dad died, and in the blink of an eye, my life was changed forever. Then it was just me and my mother. And as if that wasn't enough to try to grapple with, now I had to accept this as my new normal.

"I may not have known your dad, but from everything I've heard, I know he was an amazing man and father. And knowing that much, I know he'd want your mom to be happy." He paused to rest his arms on the table and opened his mouth to continue with his well thought out speech.

But I spoke before he did, his last few words gnawing at me as I expected they would. "Why do people say that?" I asked leaning forward to look at him. I wasn't expecting an answer. I just realised in that moment that I'd never really looked at him.

In the year I had known him, I had practiced holding a careful distance from him. When he would come over to the house, I would busy myself with something else after a brief greeting. The most time I had spent with him had been with my head buried in a book, willing myself to let the world of the characters in the book pull me away from my own. This was probably the longest amount of time I had spent with him on my own, and I found I was forced to take notice of him.

He was a tall lanky man. The only hair on his skin being his greying furrowed eyebrows as he looked back at me confused. He looked nothing like my dad. My father was tall and had a frame that indicated he had been rather athletic when he was younger, and his hair was almost always a cause for complaint from my mother, who was always telling him to cut it shorter at least. He would comply, but it would always grow right back out into the mini afro he liked within a couple of weeks. I could almost hear my mother's exasperated laugh at his uncontrollable mass of hair. I suppose I could learn to find some strange comfort in the fact that his replacement was the furthest thing from looking like him. I could live with that.

"Why do people presume to know what a dead person would want? I mean, the only real assumption you could make about them is that maybe they didn't want to die. You are right about one thing though. You didn't know my dad, so knowing that much, maybe don't assume you know what he'd want. You don't, no one does, not anymore anyway."

He drew away, taken aback by my words. I'd get a talking to from my mom about this later and would probably be forced to apologize, but I'm not sorry, not about this. I am just so tired of people assuming what he would want, especially people who did not know him. I knew my father, I loved my father, but even I couldn't begin to say what he would want. I know if he had some kind of choice he would want to be here with me and my mother, enjoying life's simple pleasures, but he had no say in the matter. Like, he would never have a say in this either. He was dead, and who were we to even begin to presume what the dead would or wouldn't want.

That said, I was suddenly in no mood to stomach any more of this, and so I got up from my seat and excused myself from our table, not waiting for his response as I walked away and headed out to the balcony smoking area of the restaurant.

There were only a handful of people out on the balcony, probably due to the surprisingly cold weather we had been having despite it being the middle of January, which had always been rather warm around here. I could distinctly remember a couple of warm weeks in early January last year before school had opened. I had spent most of those days by our pool that summer, enjoying the feel of the sun on my skin and immersing myself in the cool water in a futile attempt to drown everything around me out.

I smiled slightly at a memory where one such immersion attempt had been so rudely interrupted. I quickly shook my head, refusing to let those memories resurface. I saved those memories for when I was on my own in my room. Those memories and moments were ours, just between the two of us, and every now and again, I wondered if he thought about it when he looked at me. I would like to think that he does. Those memories did not belong here, and so instead, I just stood there leaning against the balcony railing watching as cars and people went by below, refusing to let my mind wonder back to those memories.

No, right now, I wanted to be angry and sullen. I couldn't do that when I thought about him or what we had shared. Right now, I just needed to feel what I was feeling. I don't know how long I stood there just watching as people around the small part of town I could see from here went about their lives. Everyone was doing something, moving, laughing, talking loudly, and just living their lives, and here I was just watching as everyone else went about their lives. If that isn't the perfect metaphor for my life, I don't really know what is. It felt as if someone had pressed the pause button on my life since my father had passed away and I was still desperately trying to find the remote.

Lukhanyiso Nqeno

I sighed and turned in the direction of the sound of a door opening at the other end of the balcony, followed quickly by a familiar booming voice calling out my name.

"Sam?!" Lunga called as he came towards me, his arms raised triumphantly as he strode more confidently towards me. "I thought that was you," he said with a smile as he opened his arms to envelope me in a hug. I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck as he wrapped his arms around my waist, enveloping me in his warmth. His hugs never failed to make me feel just a little bit better.

Lunga was one of the few people who could still tolerate me, and I was more than grateful he did. I do not know what I would've done without him really. "What are you doing here?" I asked peering over his shoulder to see if I could spot his parents and his twin brother, Khaya, at one of the tables in the restaurant.

"It's a public place Sam, anyone can come here."

I rolled my eyes and shoved him playfully. He barely moved. All I did was awkwardly push at muscle.

"I was here with the team, for morale, at least that's what coach said," he said, looking back into the restaurant to wave his teammates off. I just caught a glance of them leave the restaurant as he did. He turned back to me, looking down at me with a warm smile before he continued.

"I saw your mom, and I'm assuming her boyfriend's son and the aforementioned boyfriend when we were getting up to leave. Although I did have my eye on this really familiar girl staring out into the abyss before I saw them, which only confirmed my suspicion that it was none other than my long lost next door neighbor and friend, Sam," he said smiling proudly at his deduction skills.

I looked back at the table I had left a few minutes ago. I could now make out three heads at the table. My mom had made up a flimsy excuse about going to get a few things at Pick 'n Pay to give her new fiancée and I a moment to talk, which had obviously not turned out as well as she had hoped. And Sbusiso, my future stepbrother, was almost always famously late. In his defense, he was coming down from his mom's place in East London to make it to this makeshift family lunch.

"Well done, Sherlock," I said with a weak laugh before flopping down at one of the tables in the smoking area.

"Are you okay?" Lunga asked kneeling down so we were eye level. I smiled weakly at him, grateful that he was here so I'd have someone to talk to. I could always talk to Lunga. He'd gotten me through a really rough patch after my dad died and I kind of leaned on him a lot since then.

We had always been good friends, him and I, although people always associated me more with Khaya than Lunga. I suppose that made sense seeing as Khaya and I were almost always seen together, especially at public gatherings. The thing with the Nqaba twins was there were not a lot of people who were friends with both of them. So on the odd chance anyone saw me with Lunga, they didn't much assume anything of it, which I was actually kind of grateful for. Khaya was also a good friend of mine, but I had slowly learnt he was not a fan of having anything in common with his brother, which oddly enough included me. I didn't have the energy for that conversation, so I just let him be, and Lunga kept enough of a distance from his brother that I doubted I was ever a topic of conversation. I know it's silly, but we were all great friends once, and despite the rift between the two of them, they were still two of my best friends and selfishly enough I needed both of my friends right now.

"You don't miss anything do you?" I asked, massaging the back of my neck.

He shook his head in response. "Not when it comes to you," He said softly, as he reached up to move a strand of my braid away from my face.

"They're getting married," I muttered after a few moments silence, and his face fell.

"Oh Sam, I'm so sorry."

I couldn't help but chuckle a little. I leaned in until my forehead was touching his. "I think the correct reply to that statement is congratulations," I whispered.

He laughed and pulled away slightly to meet my eyes. "Well, I've never been known for saying the right thing," he said raising his eyebrow thoughtfully.

"You always say the right thing," I said softly.

"I doubt that." His eyes were searching mine while I stared back into his brown eyes, wondering what it was he searched for when he did that.

"Um... hey," a tentative voice called, breaking our trance. Sbusiso stood by the door looking at us, his expression quizzical.

I sat up straight, Lunga didn't move a muscle, and I could still feel his eyes on me as I turned to speak to Sbu.

"Hey, did they send you to get me?"

Sbu shook his head, taking a reluctant step towards us. "No, we were about to order, figured we'd get you a takeaway. So what will it be?"

I smiled at my future stepbrother. I rarely ever saw him. He was in his third year at the University of Johannesburg, and only came home about three times a year. He always made sure to drop by and say hi when he did. I knew him better than I did his dad. Him I actually like. He looked a lot like his dad, except he had a lot more hair. I have never seen pictures of his father when he was younger, but I think Sbusiso was as close a representation of his father in his younger years as I would see.

"Buffalo wings, ribs with chips, and no onion rings. And do you think you could get me a bar one milkshake in those little takeaway cups?" Both he and Lunga chuckled. I looked from one to the other, then decided I didn't care if I had missed the joke.

"Got it," Sbu said as he turned to leave. He stopped and turned on his heels. "I don't know what happened before I got here, none of my business really, but if you need a ride back home, I can drive you back."

I opened my mouth to say something, unsure if I was in any rush to go home, when Lunga pushed himself off the floor and spoke as he brushed some dirt off the knees of his pants. "I'll walk her home," he said looking at me reassuringly, somehow understanding my hesitation.

I smiled up at him grateful. "Okay, well, I will see you when I see you and nice to see you—" he gestured towards Lunga, his eyebrows furrowed in a feigned attempt to recall his name. "Which one are you again?" he asked, a playful grin spreading across his face.

Lunga rolled his eyes. "Come on man. We look nothing alike."

Lukhanyiso Nqeno

To this Sbu shrugged and reached for the door. "I can't be blamed for that. The moment I hear twin I start seeing double even if the supposed doppelgangers don't even look related."

I couldn't help but laugh. I had required physical evidence in the form of a birth certificate before believing Lunga and Khaya were twins. They looked nothing alike. The only traits they shared were their height and their dimples. Other than that, they didn't even look related.

"Well get home safe, and Sam if you want to talk about all of this, you have my number." With that he turned and left to go back to our table with my mom and his dad.

"I kind of like him," Lunga said with a shrug.

"Yeah I do too."

"On the bright side, at least you got to pick your brother. I would give anything to pick my brother, anyone other than Khaya would be great," he said, his tone teasing, but there was a hint of seriousness in his voice though.

"Be careful what you wish for. It could get a whole lot worse than Khaya," I said with a laugh as he sat down across from me at the table. "I highly doubt that," he said shaking his head.

"Oh? You don't know that. You could have a psychotic homicidal maniac as a brother." His laugh came out as a loud roar. I couldn't help but join in.

"I still don't get why you two don't like each other," I said after our laughing slowly started to subside. I wondered if this time he'd come clean about why he and his brother never saw eye to eye. They were competitive when we were younger. They still were, I suppose. Nowadays they tolerated each other to an extent. I couldn't remember the last time I'd hung out with both of them at the same time in the same place.

"Of course you don't," he said, an amused expression playing across his face. "You want ice cream?" he asked, changing the subject as he often did when our conversations seemed to circle the topic of him and his brother. I shrugged with a smile, knowing I wouldn't get any answers today. I was never one to turn down ice cream, and he knew that.

It felt like we'd been sitting there for hours eating ice cream outside in fifteen-degree weather as we talked about everything and yet nothing. He was good at letting me skate around issues until I was ready to really talk. He had a rare patience with me, the kind of patience I really needed and right now could only really find with him.

I could remember him sliding down to sit next to me on the carpeted floor of my parent's room the day of my father's funeral. Neither one of us said a word. We just sat there our hands intertwined until I curled myself into his arms and let the tears that I had refused to shed stream silently down my cheeks. I had made it a point to not cry in front of anyone other than my mother since my father had passed away, out of pure stubbornness really, but seeing him in that coffin, still and unmoving, had done me in. I had been a zombie the rest of that day.

My father's funeral was a blur really. I couldn't even remember how I had gotten to my parents' room. I could vaguely remember people trying to talk to me and offer their condolences. I had somehow made my way to my parents' room and the next thing I knew, I was sitting there with Lunga and I cried and he just held me and let me cry. I didn't know how much I needed that until right then. I couldn't help but love him for that, for his unwavering patience with me. I don't know if I deserve it but I am beyond grateful for him.

It was when I watched my mother and her new family leave the restaurant with little more than a glance in my direction that I realized I didn't want to skate around the issue anymore. I'm angry, at everyone and I hate myself for it. I'm angry at my mom for moving on because I don't know how to. I'm angry at my future stepdad for no reason in particular actually. I'm angry at my dad for dying of all things. And the thing is, I have no right to be angry at anyone, least of all my mom. She doesn't deserve that. But knowing that doesn't make me any less angry; if anything it makes me angrier.

We were on our way home, the sun beginning to set behind us when I finally spoke up about my mom and her engagement, having stayed carefully off that topic during our time together.

"You know I feel like a piece of shit for being mad at her," I said softly, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets as a light breeze began to pick up.

"You're allowed to be upset about this Sam," Lunga said tenderly.

I stopped walking, trying to arrange my thoughts before I spoke. "I want her to be happy. I'm not so selfish that I don't want that for her. It's just that after my dad died, all I had was my mom. At least we could mourn and remember him together. But now she's moving on, and I'm still stuck in place." I paused taking a deep breath as I let my own words sink in.

"I've never felt more alone," I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper. A part of me was hoping he wouldn't hear that part, but it wasn't like Lunga to miss anything.

He reached out towards me, taking my hand in his. "You're not alone Sam. I can't pretend to know what you're going through, but I'm sure your mom still hurts over your dad just as much as you do. And even if she isn't, you aren't alone. I need you to remember that," he cupped my face in his hands, his eyes meeting mine intently. "I will always be here for you Sam, always." He drew me into his arms in a warm embrace. He smelt like freshly mowed grass and the earth on a rainy day. He felt like home. "Even as just a consolation prize," he whispered as his lips pressed against my forehead softly.

I laughed and looked up at him. "You are quite the consolation prize," I joked unable to stop myself from smiling back at him. One of my favorite things about Lunga was his smile. He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, with skin the color of dark chocolate and light brown eyes. Even with the obvious good looks, my favorite thing about him was still his smile. His smile was unbearably infectious. Seeing him smile never failed to make me smile.

"I told you, you always say the right thing," I said smiling up at him, profoundly grateful for him.

"I mean it," he said caressing my cheek softly.

"Well then in that case," I said straightening up proudly, my eyes meeting his kind gaze, "Ditto."

It was dark out when I finally got back home. I had hoped my mother would be in her room, so I could grab my food and go hide out in my own room. Unfortunately I opened the backdoor and walked into the kitchen to find my mother standing by the sink, her arms folded across her chest. I sighed, already exasperated before she'd even uttered a word.

"Would you care to explain yourself?" she said, her voice laced with as much indignation as was openly displayed on my face.

Lukhanyiso Nqeno

My father used to say I got my stubbornness from my mother. When we felt we were right, neither one of us much liked backing off. Not having him as a buffer had made agreeing on anything a mission between us. She'd had to learn to let more things slide with me lately though. I certainly haven't made any of this easier for her.

"I didn't appreciate what he said," I said, heading to the microwave knowing she'd most likely put my food in there, and just as expected there it was, already dished out no less. I couldn't help but smile. Even when she was annoyed with me, she couldn't help but be thoughtful.

"So you got up and left?" I turned to face her, now emulating her stance and folding my arms across my chest defensively.

"You say that like it's a bad thing, trust me mom the alternative was a whole lot worse."

She gritted her teeth and took a deep breath. She looked up at the ceiling, taking a moment before speaking. "The whole point of that lunch was for you two to at least find some common ground. You leaving before lunch even began didn't help. What did he even say to you anyway?"

My eyebrows furrowed as I momentarily wondered why he didn't tell her. I shrugged, quickly reaching the conclusion that he'd done that either to save face or get in my good graces. Whichever it was, it was done in his own self-interest, and I didn't care for it.

"Well if he didn't tell you, I most certainly won't."

I gasped dramatically, my eyes widening as I did. "And look at that we now have common ground. There, problem solved."

She was not impressed by my feigned problem-solving skills.

"This is no time for sarcasm," she said sternly. I shrugged, turning to reheat my food. "I'm trying to have a conversation with you Sam."

"I don't know what you want me to say mom," I said softly, unable to maintain my façade of nonchalance. Beneath the snarky comments and exasperation, I was honestly just tired of everything. I was tired of being sad. I was tired of feeling pressured to move on at the same pace as everyone else was, tired of missing my dad and feeling distant from my mom. I'm tired of having to put on a brave face for everyone and pretending I'm fine, but more than anything, I'm just tired of being tired.

"I just want us to talk." She took a tentative step towards me.

"About what mom? You're getting married. What do you want me to say? Congratulations? I'm happy for you?"

She no longer looked annoyed. That was now replaced with a pained expression, and she almost looked like she might be on the verge of tears. I had only ever seen my mother cry a total of four times. The first was at her mother's funeral, the second was at her and dad's vow renewal, the third was when she heard my father had died, and the last time I'd seen her cry was at his grave the day of his funeral. I wondered if I would be the reason for the fifth time. I really hope it wouldn't be. She took another breath, fighting back tears. I am angry, but the last thing I want is to make her cry. This isn't on her. It's on me, and God knows she's carried enough for the both of us over the past three years.

"I just don't want you to think I'm betraying you or your father's memory."

I closed the gap between us and took her hand. "You aren't betraying anyone," I said reassuringly. "You're allowed to move on mom. What you can't do is expect me to move on at the same pace. I can't just suddenly be happy about this whole new family and it's not fair of you or anyone else to expect that of me."

She shook her head in protest. "That's not what I'm doing."

I shrugged and opened the microwave, hoping I didn't have to reheat my food again. "That's kind of how it feels. I just need time mom. I'll get over it," I said with a faint smile.

"I didn't know you felt that way," she said apologetically.

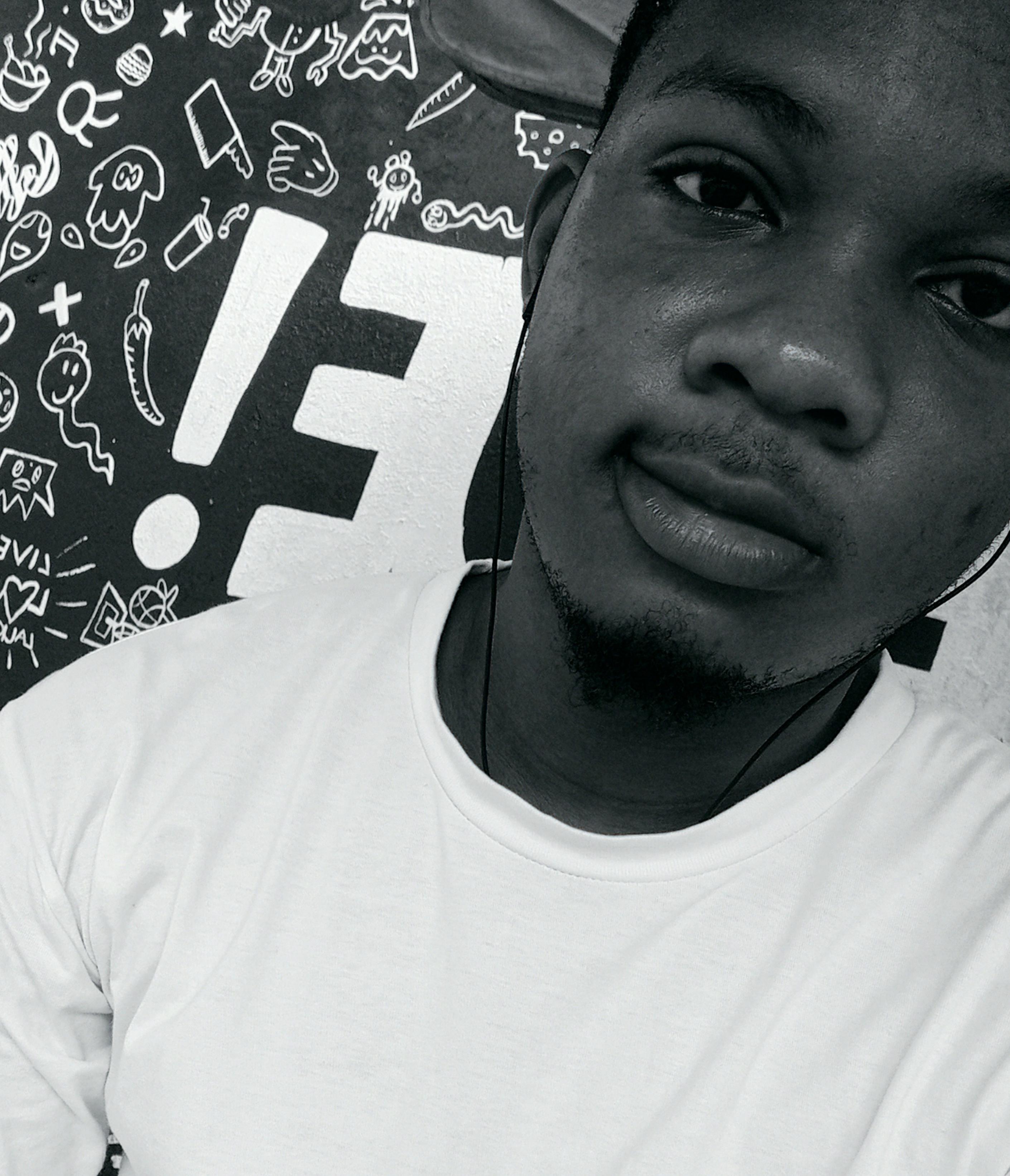
"Well, in your defense, I rarely talk about how I feel," I said with a chuckle. I had gotten oddly good at keeping my thoughts and feelings to myself.

My mother, however, did not seem as amused by my confession as I was. In fact, she seemed rather dejected by my words. "I wish you would," she whispered, her tone despondent.

I don't think I really know how to express my feelings anymore. In the past couple of years, it's become easier to pretend like I was okay. I remember how my state of grief worried my mother, how much she hated seeing me in pain. I watched as she struggled with her grief and tried to deal with mine as well. She was trying to carry my pain and hers, and it was eating her up inside. So I tried to hide my pain, hoping it would help her, and I had almost convinced myself that maybe it would help me, which was a delusional thought of course. Burying my feelings had not helped me at all and it obviously had not helped my mother.

Even so, it was just easier to keep up the façade with everyone, but I never really dealt with my father's death. I still carry around this weight with a smile plastered on my face, and maybe one day I'll deal with it and move on with my life like everyone else has, but not today.

No, today I would go back to my room, devour my food, watch a movie, and try my best not to cry myself to sleep. And tomorrow I'd go to school, pretend to listen during class, talk and maybe laugh with my friends, and just try to get through another week. And one day in the not so distant future, maybe I will finally be okay, but that day most definitely is not today.



Dexter Alex

Dexter Alex from Nigeria is an African storyteller and freelance writer who enjoys plotting schemes alongside his writing. His works of fiction are mostly aimed at exposing new ideas to the minds of his readers. When he is not ghostwriting or plotting new ways to break into prisons, he does close-up magic. He is passionate about music, literature, and bread.

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The Night the Sky Rained Fire

I should have listened to papa. If I had, I would be home and not here with Nshuti watching as the streets where we grew up burn before us.

I ran outside with my boyfriend, watching as the large plume of smoke with a fiery heart hurtled towards the village. It smacked into a building a few streets away, its shockwave rattling the building we were in so much I could feel the ground tremble underneath my feet. Nshuti disappeared outside to see what had happened. He, like me, thought it was the rebel forces testing their weapons, but then we heard it.

Gunshots—filling the air, sounding like corn over a fire. The shots continued and were soon accompanied by screams and cries that broke out over the village. I could barely see from where I stood outside. The fire from the sky had birthed some buildings in its kind, setting them ablaze and filling the air with nasty dark soot that made seeing more than a few feet in front of us impossible.

“Keza!”

I turned to see my boyfriend, Nshuti, with a panicked look on his face. The smoke had gotten to his clothes, turning them black, but what caught my attention was the blood on his face.

“Nshuti! What happened?”

“It’s okay, I’m alright. It’s the president.”

“What?” I asked, confused as to what he meant.

“His plane was shot down. I don’t know who did it, but that was the plane’s engine which hit Y’e y’Ighugu center. The Hutus have risen up. They’re coming for us all.”

I felt the bile in my stomach leap to my tongue, making me instantly nauseated. If I had been home with my family, then maybe I would be safe. But here I was, far away from town, against my father’s wishes with Nshuti. I turned to see him pack a few things into a small bag. He opened his drawer to find his plastic identity card. Tutsi, just like me. We knew there was bad blood, we knew something evil was on its way, but now, with what had just begun, those of us here in the village would be hunted down.

“What happened?”

“Mama Geraldine. She was next to me when someone, I didn’t see his face... God, I can’t... someone shot her. We have to go Keza, grab your things. We will be safe in town. We’ll go to my brother’s place and pass the night. The army might come tomorrow and clear up things. But we need to leave, tonight.”

I grabbed my purse and put on my shoes; I hadn’t come with much. It was one night with my boyfriend, and I could always leave a change of clothes at his place. I found a loose pair of jeans in his closet, which I almost jumped both feet into before I secured it with a belt. As I put on my top, there was a loud banging at the door. Nshuti pulled me behind him quickly, before pulling off a curtain rod and walking to the door.

“Who is it?”

“Nshuti, I know you’re in there.” I heard the man spit “*Inyenzi*. Open up and see who it is.”

Dexter Alex

"Dammit," Nshuti whispered, "It's Bogarde. We have to leave out the back. Hurry now."

He took my hand and pulled me along as we rushed for the backyard. The only entrance would be through the door, which held back the man who was looking to hurt him. Nshuti pulled up a few empty crates and stacked them on each other. I could hear Bogarde hitting the door, trying to break it down. Nshuti used the curtain rod to break off the glass shards cemented into the top of the fence to discourage thieves. It tumbled off as he climbed over. I followed suit as he helped me over the fence. It took us to a small alley between a shop and the house. Completely covered by the darkness, we moved down the alley, which ran parallel to the main roads and was normally inaccessible, except to the shop owners.

"We have to stay off the roads. Come on, hurry."

We cut through back streets and went through homes when possible, trying to avoid the shooting we could hear happening on the roads. We spotted a roadblock set up with men carrying guns. The bubble was finally at its end and the rage they felt had burst. I saw the bodies of two people on the ground, the fires nearly illuminating their faces temporarily as I saw the bullet holes in their heads.

"Keza, keep moving!"

"They're dead. Mana! Nshu, they're dead."

"And if we don't keep moving, we will be too—"

The sound of a car engine caught his attention as it pulled out of the driveway of a small house. The driver of the car turned it around so fast it seemed it would ram off the dirt road as he was trying to drive out of the village. Nshuti jumped in front of the car, waving his hands. "Help us! Please! Kunga-twe! No, stop!"

The black Volkswagen pulled to a stop merely inches from his feet, still roaring to go, even with the man in front of it. I heard the sound of feet smacking against concrete behind me and turned to look. Further down the road, two men with burning tree branches and a machete were running, heading towards us. The door of the Volkswagen swung open and we jumped in. The driver hit the pedal and the car jerked into motion before the people after us could reach us. The car swerved side to side as the sounds of bullets whipped past us. Nshuti pulled my head down behind the seat as I screamed.

"Nshuti! In the glove box!" the driver called out.

Nshuti reached across, between the front seats and opened the glove box packed with ammunition. A grenade sat proudly in the center of the metal and copper mass, knowingly staring at us. Nshuti grabbed it and pulled the pin before he stuck his head and arm out the window and threw it as far back as he could. I couldn't see if the explosion hit the men chasing after us, but the shootings stopped right after the sound reached my ears.

"Urakoze, Mr Paul. I almost didn't even see you. Thank you, sir."

"It's alright Nshuti. Who is this with you?"

He looked back at me, seeing the fear etched into my face. He pulled me into a hug there in the backseat, stroking my hair. "She is the woman I intend to marry, sir. This is Keza."

"Is she Tutsi?"

"Yes sir, I am."

"Then you better come with us. Where is your family, Keza?"

"They're in the city. I have to get to them. What part are you heading to?" I asked.

"The city? I'm leaving Rwanda tonight! *Ibyo Igisimba!* No, I'm leaving tonight. You should both come with me. It will be safer."

"The country? Isn't it too early for that?" Nshuti asked, looking down the road.

"No. This is it Nshuti. The end is here. The president's plane was shot down. Everything is about to descend into total chaos. If you don't leave now, you might not be able to leave Rwanda ever again. This is it."

"What about my family? My father and brothers?" I asked.

"You stand a better chance away from here. Everyone does. If your father knows any better, he will leave Rwanda with them tonight. Where is your mother?" Mr Paul asked, taking a left turn as we reached the final intersection that went off the country roads and connected to the city.

"She's late," Nshuti answered before I could speak. He paused, realizing he was a little too plain, and squeezed my hand before continuing. "Mr Paul, do we all have to leave? This is our home too! The government will protect us."

Mr Paul shook his head like someone who knew and had seen the reality for what it was. "This is anarchy, boy; even the government is not safe." We could see the city now, small clouds of smoke rose up here and there, blocking out the moon. He stopped the car a little further down the road, but kept the engine running.

"This is as far as I can go. I know you're worried about your family, but this decision here is the biggest you might ever have to make. Leave with me, both of you, and once it is all settled, we'll find your family."

A gunshot rang out over the city. Papa was all alone with my baby brothers, Hakim and Isidore. They were too young to take care of themselves. They would be so scared without me, and having only papa to keep them safe tugged at my conscience. If only I was home as he had wanted. If only I had listened to him. I had to find him.

"I have to find my father. Mr Paul, I cannot go with you. Maybe this whole thing will be done by morning."

"Well then. Best of luck to you."

"Thank you." I wrapped my hands around Nshuti, dragging his body into mine and burying my face in his shoulder to stop the tears. "Go with him, Nshuti."

"Are you crazy? I'm coming with you."

"But it's dangerous."

"Which is why I'm coming. Thank you, Mr Paul, maybe we will meet again after all of this is over."

Mr. Paul picked up a small handgun from the front of his car and handed it over to Nshuti. "Can you use this? If no, you'll have to learn fast."

Dexter Alex

He did not wait for Nshuti's answer before he turned his eyes back on the road—scouring for his path ahead and away from it all. Nshuti and I leapt out of the vehicle, ducking our heads as yet another shot signaled from afar the choice I had made.

The car sped off on the freeway, joined by a few other vehicles fleeing the city. Nshuti and I watched as he disappeared in moments from our view. We both knew the city well, as we had grown up here. But with the chaos everywhere, it would be a lot more difficult to navigate. My house was on the far side of town, and it would take the entire night to get there on foot, but I didn't care.

Nshuti led me cautiously through the streets, constantly watching out for the gunfire and the Hutu men walking around with clubs, machetes and guns. The death of the president was the catalyst they needed to take up arms and show how they truly felt about us. As we walked past an apartment building, the sounds of struggle—Tutsi voices—played partners to war chants coming from the rooms. Someone was thrown over the balcony and fell three floors to what was certainly their death. The sound of the body hitting the floor sickened my stomach and caused us to hurry. We took a turn, hoping to take a slightly shorter route to my home.

"Hey! You there! Stop!"

We froze. Nshuti slowly slipped the gun around his waist and hid it with his shirt. We both turned around slowly to face the man who had called. He was huge with bulging muscles and a club in his hand. It was only one guy, but he was menacing enough to scare Nshuti and I into silence. He approached us, power in every step as he scanned our faces. Thankfully, the view wasn't entirely a good one in the dark night.

"Mwene Data! My brother. Umeze ute?" Nshuti asked, walking forwards to meet the man before he could reach us.

"*Inyenzi!*" he spat. "I am no brother to a cockroach! Where is your identity card?"

"Ah, calm down. It's me, Nshuti. This is my sister, you know me and my mother. Mama Nyeze. I have sold her food to you once. We are just trying to get home, I don't have it on me."

"Mama Nyeze is dead." The man spoke, controlled aggression in his voice. He was obviously on some sort of drug. "She sympathized with those cockroaches. You might too."

"No, nooo, *wanjye*, I do not. We're all on the same side."

He walked past my boyfriend, locking eyes with me. I shuddered as I realized that he could probably snap my neck in one blow. The club in his hand was bloody from previous use; he had probably already murdered someone tonight and was looking for more. The drug he was on was innocent blood, and he had probably become addicted. He smelled my hair before he spoke. "Why are you outside?"

"We went to my..."

"Not you!" He cut back at Nshuti. "Let the girl speak."

I felt my lips fail me, I wanted this to be over as soon as possible. If I spoke, he would probably be able to tell that I was Tutsi the moment I spoke. I didn't have the confidence that Nshuti had. I would mess everything up. Fear grabbed me by the shoulders as I stared at him, words refusing to form.

"Look, she's young and scared. That's why..."

I flinched as his hand swung, missing my face by inches. But then I realized that he wasn't aiming for me. The back of his palm connected with Nshuti's face, knocking him back. He landed on the street, the gun clattering out in front of us. The Hutu man exchanged glances with Nshuti before they both rushed at the gun on the floor. Nshuti grabbed it, but the man knocked it out of his grip, before dragging him to his knees.

Nshuti punched the man in the belly as hard as he could, but it had little to no effect as he responded with his right fist to Nshuti's face. I watched in horror as he picked up his club, heaved it above his head to strike Nshuti. It missed by mere centimeters, bouncing off the road. He lifted it again, pinning down his target with a knee, ready to bash his skull in. A loud bang echoed through the streets as the man paused, almost frozen in his stance with the club over his head. He coughed, spitting blood over Nshuti. I held the gun in my hands, watching the hole I had created in the man's back expand.

He fell to the ground, dead.

"Nshuti! Nshu... are you?"

He pushed the man's body away as he replied from underneath him. "I'm fine. I'm fine."



The attacks went on into the night, with the sounds of death all around us. The roads had become too dangerous to walk through, so we kept to compounds, walking through those which we could or going around their fences. We saw a woman run out her home; she carried a baby in her arms as she ran past us. Nshuti and I took to our heels as we saw the mob that was chasing her. We ran back the way we had come, crisscrossing the buildings in the dark, the chants of the murderous men not far behind.

Nshuti pulled me into a small alcove, concealed from the street by a small bush. We watched as the woman got into a car parked on the sidewalk. She lowered the seat and clutched onto her baby, covering its mouth with her hands. The Hutu men ran into view, passing us. But the woman was not so lucky.

We watched in horror for the next hour as they set the car ablaze with the woman and her baby in it. Through the thick bushes, I felt her eyes on me as the flames licked at her flesh, tearing her soul from her body. The cries of the baby brought Nshuti and I to tears as we held onto each other in the dark there, sparsely illuminated by the flames that procured the death of another. We were literally inches from death.

I didn't know when I fell asleep. I woke up the next morning with Nshuti cradling my body by the wall of the alcove. We stayed there all night as the men camped around the fire till the morning. There were fewer men by morning, but they were close by, as Nshuti had heard them talking. As the men nodded off, tired after their night of prolonged savagery and murdering, we slipped past into the nearest compound.

"Who's there!" a man sitting outside on his porch spoke up when he saw us. "Stop there! Stop or I'll shoot!"

Dexter Alex

We threw both hands in the air instinctively, before turning to see the man. He shut his gate before aiming his gun at us again. He was just as old as my father, but somehow he looked even more stressed. The glasses that sat on the bridge of his nose shook as he addressed us in a voice that threatened to break our spirits.

"Are you Hutu?"

"Yes," we chorused, lying.

"Then where is your ID! Where is it?"

"Sir, we aren't coming from home, we don't have it on us."

"So why should I believe you then? You're Tutsi and that's a problem for me." He pulled at his gun and it made a sound that stressed his intent, and pointed it at Nshuti's head, grimacing. "Hutu... or Tutsi."

Nshuti grabbed my hand, squeezing it softly as he let out a breath with his reply on it. "I am a Tutsi. I am not your enemy, sir."

The man stared at us both, eyes threatening to pull the trigger. He turned to me and pulled my face up so he could see me clearly. I didn't know what I looked like, but I was certain my hair had come undone, and sweat, tears and soot must've tainted it. He let go of me and put the gun away before he spoke.

"You remind me of my daughter. That's why I will spare you cockroaches. Now get out of my house."

Nshuti mumbled a thank you as we rushed out. At the intersection, we spotted a truck which carried away bodies that had been dumped out on the streets. The entire bucket of the truck was full of bodies, all of them lifeless. Each bearing a hole, a gape, missing the head, or sprawled out grotesquely with the head pummeled in. One of them wore a blue shirt which eerily resembled one which Hakim was wearing the last time I saw him. My heart broke. I knew it wasn't him; the face it still had made me see that it was a different person, but what was to say that he and my father had survived the night?

"Nshuti, I have an idea. Those trucks won't be disturbed by the roadblocks. We can use them to get across town."

"How?"

It was nasty, but we did it. My hands wouldn't stop shaking as we smeared ourselves in blood abundant from bodies nearby, and we lay on the road as the trucks approached. Our bodies were picked up and thrown onto the pile. The smell of death and onset of decay hung in the air as some of the bodies had begun to rot already. My boyfriend beckoned me to keep my eyes open, so we would know where we were. But I didn't want to; I couldn't bear to see the bodies all around me. Young and old, man and woman. Nobody was spared. The morning had brought a wave of silence over Rwanda that chilled me to the bone.

The killings had gone on everywhere, as the radio on the truck gave updates, we realized that high profile Tutsis had also been targeted and killed, and the army had taken up arms, as names and addresses were handed out to them, people who were to be executed. Their only crime, being born a Tutsi. I could never truly understand the truth behind the killings or the reasons as to why they were done by these people.

The truck got to the final stop that was closest to my home. Nshuti and I leapt off as the vehicle stopped for another pick-up. I ran as I could see my home already. The surrounding buildings looked as though they were hit by a hurricane. Their gates left open and windows and doors broken. As I got to mine, I saw that our gate had been ripped off its hinges, and our house was nothing but a charred mass of black burnt wood and cinderblocks.

"Keza," Nshuti called out to me from behind.

I couldn't bear it. The tears came again, as a river, unstoppable and unrelenting. I let a cry escape my lungs as nothing else mattered. I had held in my fears for so long, but I couldn't anymore. I couldn't understand how I had gone from a normal girl to killing a man in one night and then, realize that I've lost my home. My heart felt weak, but it was beating so quickly, I could hear it in my ears.

"Keza!"

The voice was different.

I turned and next to Nshuti stood the one thing that had given me hope. My father.

I held him, somehow crying even more as I wondered if I would have any more tears after this. He hugged me, trying to console me. I quickly realized that he has alone.

"Papa where are they? Where is Hakim and Isadore?"

"They're fine. Your brothers are fine. The church at *Elitche ete* is a safe space. The priest there has assured us our safety. I got them there last night. I came here to see if there was anything we could salvage and I found you. God, I thought you were dead. Ha, *urukundo nakundaga*, don't ever leave me again."

"I'm sorry, papa, I'm so sorry."

"It's alright. We have to go. Come and join your brothers." I watched as he turned to Nshuti, who stood off by the side. "Is this him? Your boyfriend?"

I was put off by the question as I realized that this was the first time they were meeting. Papa took my silence for a yes and walked over to him, staring him down. Nshuti held his ground, but there was still an inkling of fear in his eyes as he watched the older man walk up to him, raising his hand.

"Thank you for bringing back my daughter. Now, let's go."

We got back into the streets as the midday sun hit its high, hammering away on the country. We were safer this time, as my father led us through a path that he and a group of other Tutsis who had escaped last night took. It ran through farmlands which separated Tutsis homes, allowing us to slip through unnoticed, away from the major populous.

As we approached the church, my father narrated how they had heard the explosions, how he acted quickly, taking my brothers to the path as fast as possible. He had spoken with the priest beforehand, a Hutu man who had valued life above ethnicity and promised his church would be a sanctuary. He had spent the night trying to find Tutsis he could save and get to the church. The place was packed by morning.

Dexter Alex

We heard the screams before we saw the church, or whatever was left of it. The entire right section of the building was knocked over by a huge caterpillar. Men were running around, swinging machetes at people running away. Some were walking through the rubble, stabbing the people trapped underneath or smacking their skulls open with clubs or rocks. I was frozen in place, like a deer before the headlights of a car, unable to comprehend the horrors before me.

Papa took off, running for the church. He jumped straight at a man which a machete, tackling him down to the floor with a single strike. He punched the man right across the face, before picking up a small rock and smacking it against the man's temple. The man fell unconscious instantly. I watched as the man who had birthed me, turn into a raged animal as he picked up the man's machete and turned to the nearest Hutu man.

Nshuti took off after him, firing a shot from the gun he had at a man who blindsided my father, grabbing him from behind. It was chaos. Hakim and Isodore were nowhere to be seen as I looked around, seeing bodies that were mangled under the heaps of concrete that had fallen on them. I rushed through the ruins of the church, scanning and searching the faces of everyone I could see.

"*Inyenzi!*" a man spat at me. But I didn't care, I felt no fear. I only wanted death for the men who had done such evil.

"*Icumite!*"

He held a club in his hand, and was fairly larger than me. I picked up a jagged piece of glass, holding the sharp end up. I felt it cut into my fingers, but that would pale in comparison to the pain I would feel if this man got to me. I wasn't just fighting for justice; I was fighting for my life. Gunshot noises came in from outside, startling me. The man saw his chance and took it, rushing at me. I stepped backwards, missing the swinging blow from the club by inches. He rushed forwards again, jabbing the staff at me. It struck my stomach, knocking me to the floor.

He stepped forward, lifting the weapon up to strike, but I was faster, slicing at his shin. He howled in pain, hesitating, which gave me another opening. I drove the glass shard into his thigh, causing him to drop the club and fall to the ground, clutching his leg. Blood spilt across my face as he writhed in pain on the ground.

I picked up his club and did to the man what he had intended to do to me. I felt no pain or anger or regret. He deserved it, just like everyone else who had decided to murder my people. I turned to see my father stumble in, with Nshuti carrying him with one arm, dragging him into the church. There were two bloodied holes in his chest, the red substance spreading all over.

"Papa, papa! No nooo. Nshuti, what is this? What..."

Nshuti placed him on the ground at his request. I reached for my father, trying to cover up the wounds and stop the bleeding, but I knew, deep down, that it was of no use. He looked up at me and smiled. "*N'umukobwa wanje, kwibona.*"

I had made him proud.

I watched as his eyes fell shut and his grip on me loosened. I felt the rage evaporate, as I couldn't bring myself up to fight anymore. It had become too much for me. There was nothing left for me, no reason to keep on fighting. They would never stop trying to kill us, and I couldn't fight anymore. I noticed the church grow silent, with only the occasional gunshot being fired close by.

I looked up at a hole in the wall to see the Hutu paramilitary walk into the church. They scanned the area, seeing that my father, Nshuti and I were the only ones left in the building.

A small huddled mass in the corner, staring up at them, with defiance in our very existence. I couldn't hear what they asked, but Nshuti had answered, maintaining eye contact and never faltering. Something he said got a reaction from them as they raised their guns at us.

Nshuti turned to hug me, his back to our very own firing squad, in a final effort to protect me. Right before the bullets hit, I felt him squeeze my hand one last time, and then...

Notes

Mana!: God!

Kunga-twe!: We are one!

Urakoze: Thank you

Ibyo Igisimba!: These/those animals

Mwene Data! ... Umeze ute?: My Brother!... How are you feeling/doing?

Inyenzi!: Cockroach

wanjye: my home/heart

urukundo nakundaga: my love

Icumite!: Fuck you!

N'umukobwa wanjye, kwibona: My daughter, my heart. I am proud of you.

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Kutloano Mkhwanazi

Kutloano was born and bred in the East of Johannesburg, South Africa. She is 19 years old and currently doing her first year at the University of Pretoria. She is studying for a BA with the hopes of one day fulfilling her dreams of becoming a Neuropsychologist. Outside of her love of discovering more about the human mind and behaviour, she developed a love for storytelling through writing and public speaking at an early age.



The Power of a Half-Truth

Do you ever think about the best gift you have ever received from someone? Is it a material thing? Is it love? Is it affirmation or reassurance? Or is it simply the gift of life?

Besides the gift of life, my name is the best gift that my mother has ever given me. She birthed me with a purpose, and that purpose was to bring her the joy she had been missing in her life for a long time. With that purpose, she named me with purpose too.

Ahadi: "With much promise"

Tsatsi: "Sun"

With much promise comes the sun, Ahadi Tsatsi. My mother is a beautiful woman, and by beautiful, I mean she is strong, wise and successful. She brings purpose to life in everything that she touches, and for this, I have always admired her. I always wanted to be her. There is only one thing that she lacked though. The older I grew, the more I came to realize that my suspicions were true. My mother lacks love, and by this, I do not mean she does not know how to give it; she has plenty of it to give. I mean that she does not know what it feels like to receive real love. I always made sure that my mother knew I loved her. So did my little brother, my grandmother, my grandfather, and everyone else who mattered, except my father.

I think it would break her to know this, but my mother is the very first person who taught me how to lie. For this, I am grateful because lying is a useful skill that we take with us through our everyday lives. Lies tend to protect a lot of hearts.

Even if they are little white lies, they are keeping a piece of something that someone else thinks is important together. The first time my mother lied to me, I think I was ten years old. That day she came to kiss me goodbye in the morning, and she had a very little scar on her forehead, as little as the lie she had to tell me. I asked what happened and she told me that she was so busy at work the day before. She was walking around carelessly and did not notice a wall and she walked into it. She laughed at her clumsiness and, like every other mother does, reassured me that she would be okay.

When I was fourteen, I remember a lie that was a little bit bigger. I walked into their room and found my father yelling at my mother. He quickly stopped when I walked in, and my mother took this opportunity to walk out the room with me. I asked her why he was yelling, and she told me that he was just a little frustrated from work. It is nothing that I should worry about. Again, my mother always reassured me that I, as her child, never worried about how she was doing.

That day a lot came together though. Every little white lie and half-truth she had ever told me started bringing itself together, and it broke my heart all at once. On this day, I realized that my father had been the wall that my mother had been walking into for all these years. I failed to understand how a man who loved me so much failed to love the mother of his children the same way, how a man who cared about me more than life itself could not care the same way for the person who gave him the best gift he has ever received... his children.

Once I had figured out the truth it became so hard to be angry at my mother because I knew what she thought she was protecting... my heart. I know she did not want me to grow up not believing in love and everything that came with it.

Kutloano Boikgantsho Mkhwanazi

The problem with lying, however, is this: as much as you think telling someone a half-truth is protecting them, every half becomes whole. Once it does, the heart breaks as a whole too, not just into little halves. I personally believe it is easier to bring yourself back together all at once and not just in little pieces because that way, something will always be missing. It's not impossible to put a broken glass back together. With the right amount of determination, it can be done, but it will never be the same. It will never be whole and will never be as beautiful as it was before. That is what half-truths do to people; they break you and fix you until you cannot be broken or fixed anymore.

As time went by, I learnt to understand my mother's half-truths and watched her as she started telling them to my brother too. I never understood why a woman so strong failed to leave a place that broke every bit of strength that she had, but this was not my place. I was young, and I did not understand.

My curiosity got the better of me once. I asked her why she hadn't left my father. She told me that she is okay because she had me and my little brother, her promise and her joy. She said she knew that the sun would come again just as she did when she gifted me with my name. After hearing the last half-truth, I chose to listen too. I decided never to ask her again. I learnt to live life from then onwards without asking questions I knew I did not want answers to or that I would not get truthful answers for. Like how I never asked her why the death of my father, a man who had failed to live up to his promises for so long, broke her as much as it did.

I was eighteen years old when my mother got the call that he had been involved in a fatal accident. With all the panic in her voice and her eyes, she quickly left for the hospital at two o'clock in the morning. My initial question to this situation was why he was out on a Thursday night until the early hours of the morning, and not in his home with his wife and children, but this was one of those questions I did not want an answer to.

My mom walked in a few hours later, and she looked like her life had been sucked out of her chest. As she walked in, my grandmothers and aunts were behind her. No one was saying anything to me, and I kept following them, hoping to get answers to my unasked questions. They placed my mother's mattress on the floor, and that is when I didn't need any more answers to my unasked questions. In that moment, I knew that my father was gone and he was not coming back... for good this time.

For the next few days, I watched his family run around the house like headless chickens trying to put everything together for the funeral on Saturday, except for my mother. She was not the person I knew her to be. She was literally paralyzed and stuck on that mattress the whole week. Every time I looked into her eyes, I tried to look for a broken heart, but I could not find it. All I saw was shock, disbelief, and somewhere behind all of that, I think I saw relief too. It just was not as obvious as the other emotions.

The whole family was there. Every character you could think of had arrived to send the son off. There were my aunts who sat in the kitchen every night talking about how unhappy their brother was in his marriage, and how unfortunate it is that he died before he could truly be happy, and when the gossip was running low, they would make my mother rooibos tea to drink after every few hours to 'calm the shock' apparently. They did this consistently until Friday night when my father's coffin arrived.

There were also the mourners who spoke about what a great man my father was, such a family man, and how unfortunate it was that he would not be able to see his kids grow up, but they did always managed to reassure my little brother and I that he was watching us from 'a better place'.

Then there was me, his one and only daughter who had not shed a tear the entire week. I was shocked at myself to be honest, and covered up the fact that I hadn't cried with a lie; that I was trying to be strong for my little brother and my mother, and even though I knew this was a lie, I carried on with that for the whole week. Everyone believed me, just as humans often do when they are told a lie.

Friday evening had come, and it was time for my father's coffin to arrive. My uncles welcomed his spirit home while they said our clan names. People had arrived in numbers that night, and I saw pain in each of their eyes. I heard it in their cries. It seemed like he was a good man after all. That night, I stayed up staring at his coffin with tears rolling down my face as if they would bring my father back to life. I watched the sunrise into Saturday morning, and that is when it finally hit me that I have to really say goodbye to the first man that ever loved me. It was in this moment that I realized why my mother was as paralyzed as she was. This is the man who gave her the best gift she has ever received... her children. Although he had given her some of her most painful wounds, I do believe that there was a time that they really did love each other. Real love never really truly dies. It is just withering as time passes by.

It was at the graveyard that I realized that his half-truths really meant a lot to the people he knew and who knew him. For some of them, his half-truths brought affection and reassurance. For others, his half-truths came in the form of material things. Whatever it was, the lies meant something to everyone who they had not broken yet. He was my father, my mother's husband, my grandmother's son, and my aunts' brother. In our different ways, we loved and appreciated him.

All these thoughts began to sink in when I saw his coffin being lowered into the ground. This is when I began to cry because he had done it again, he broke my heart, and this time it was because he was never coming back. How do I say goodbye to the man who taught me how I should be loved by another man, but failed to love the woman who once loved him? How do I say goodbye to a man who looked at me like I had all the stars of the universe in my eyes? How do I say goodbye to the one person who had never doubted me, even on days when I doubted myself the most? How do I say goodbye to the man who created a perfect world for me... but broke my mother's? Do I cry at the love that I have just lost and will never get back? Or do I rejoice at the chance my mother has found to put back together the pieces of her heart that she still has left?

It was in this moment that my mother looked me in the eyes and wiped my tears away. She lifted her pinkie finger up to me as she did every time I caught her trying to hide a scar she got from walking into multiple walls. It is in this moment when our fingers locked that I realized that with this promise, the sun would come again.



Tinashe J. Chipenyu

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The Lost Engagement

Tanya, Sphiwe and Nyasha come on the same day. What are the odds? One in a thousand? No, they are certainly much higher than that. At least one in ten thousand. Because this feels like a conspiracy. Tanya is the first to arrive. I'm in my room listening to 90s R&B—back when music was still music—and Joe Thomas and Usher Raymond are hitting the perfect spot. I'm making my favourite meal—spaghetti and pork trotters—so this is shaping up to be one of those delectable nights. I don't hear the knock because I have my headphones plugged in, and the music is completely transcendental. I'm quite disconnected from the real world, as they call it.

My music suddenly cuts and I'm livid because it had ascended to otherworldly levels and I am basically levitating. It's a call from an unknown number. I angrily press the answer button and brusquely growl, "Who's this?" There's no response and the call is promptly terminated. I see the door opening slowly and I wonder who it could be, seeing as Tadiwa is out of town. He's the only one in my circle who has the playfulness to pull such pranks.

She steps inside, the last person I expect to see. I can't hide my shock and she notices it because she immediately twists her face and blurts "Yes it's me, your cooking will burn." I have completely forgotten about my trotters, but it doesn't bother me that much anymore because this unexpected visitor has made me lose my appetite. I switch the gas stove off and she offers herself a seat on my couch. Typical Tanya; assertive as they come. I sit on the bed across from her and we exchange contrived pleasantries.

"I'm pregnant with your child, Tendai," she shoots.

I look at her incredulously waiting for the part where she bursts out laughing, but she remains poker-faced and I realize things might have just got real.

I'm dumbstruck. I stay quiet for a while, taking in the gravity of the situation.

"What are you talking about? If you are indeed pregnant, why... why did you come alone?" I croak.

"Who did you want me to come with? Did you impregnate another person I should know about?" she retorts fuming.

I know better than to make this a shouting contest because I will definitely lose. Dismally.

"Okay, but..."

"But what? Are you trying to say what I think you are trying to say? Are you accusing me of sleeping around?"

"No, not that Tanya. What I mean is..."

"Cut the nonsense. If you knew how angry I am, you wouldn't even think of saying what you are trying to say. Don't try me," she says authoritatively.

I realize there's nowhere to hide, so I have to resign to fate but I'm too overwhelmed to think straight. My mum will not take this well. My Pastor will probably strip me of my position in Church. He will definitely do that. Tanya tells me that her stepdad has chased her away after discovering the pregnancy through work gossip and she has come to stay. The words feel like a pivoting left hook straight to the jaw.

Tinashe J. Chipenyu

There are too many problems here. I know I can grow to like Tanya enough to tolerate her staying with me, but I have a girlfriend who comes here every weekend and has been relentlessly pestering me about marriage. We are engaged and the Pastor presided over the engagement ceremony. So that's a big problem right there—an insurmountable one.

The other issue is taking Tanya in may not make sense from a financial perspective. I don't make much money, and I'm already hamstrung from helping out with my young brother's school fees, contributing for church projects and savings. Even if I manage to break up with my girlfriend, I will not find enough money for lobola or even damages in time. Even if we ignore the lobola thing, there's a baby on the way, and babies are a huge expense. Now, I know I can't chase Tanya away. She has nowhere else to go, and besides she's too formidable to allow me to treat her like that. She would rather count rice, grain by grain than be taken for a ride. So I'm completely stuck in this. Tanya is now reclining comfortably on the bed. I let out a defeated sigh.

Sphiwe arrives at four PM. I'm shocked because she just drops an "I'm at the gate, open," text out of nowhere, which is followed promptly by an even more bizarre one, "And don't play games with me"

I have known Sphiwe for some time now, and she's more of a friend, but sometimes we breach the boundaries as many do. She stays in a nearby town. We met on Twitter and our friendship grew until we decided to meet and we did. A couple of things happened and continued to happen, and she most probably came today so that they continue happening. But she couldn't have come at a worse time. There's still tension between me and Tanya, despite our attempts at making the environment more amicable.

We are drinking orange juice and trying to make conversation about anything else except the issue at hand. So when I receive the texts, I must have looked like a ghost, because Tanya asks me what the issue is with real concern on her face.

I try to brush it aside and mumble an "It's not a big deal," but my voice betrays me because it comes out shaky. Tanya obviously notices it and continues pressing me. I'm under too much pressure, so I snap.

"Tanya, stop pestering me. You are not my wife". Tanya doesn't quite believe I just said that because she opens her mouth to reply, but words don't come out. I don't apologize to her, because I'm under too much pressure. I stare at the phone with incredulity. Then Tanya does the unthinkable; she snatches the phone from me and runs to the corner of the house. I leap like an antelope and go after her. We are in a tussle now. She finally relents and hands the phone back, but she has already read the message, I can tell by the funny look on her face.

"Is she your girlfriend, Tendai?"

"Why do you care?" I reply curtly.

"Tendai, If you invited your girlfriend, thinking that would somehow prompt me to leave, then you don't know how shameless I am."

I'm too exhausted to reply and another message has come in. Sphiwe is demanding that I open the gate. I don't know what to do, but since Sphiwe is my friend, I decide it will be easier to negotiate with her. I suspect Tanya will follow me outside, so I quickly go out and lock Tanya inside. She's shouting, but I have too much on my plate to care. I run to the gate—an unnecessarily huge black monstrosity which stands out in the neighborhood like, well, a huge black monstrosity.

I'm trying to avoid drama, so I talk to her through the small opening on the gate. It's big enough for me to stick my whole head through. Sphiwe is there with a frown on her face and a huge travelling bag. I can't believe what I'm seeing. Am I dreaming? What is this cruel joke?

I try to rationalize it. Maybe she's just passing by on her way somewhere. Because what's the point of the huge travelling bag. But the tone in her message was different. It was pretty belligerent and a tad out of character. She sounded angry with me for some reason.

"Tendai, open the gate. Your girlfriend is in the house, right?"

"No, she's not," I reply absentmindedly. I'm tired.

"Okay, so open the gate, because I'm coming to stay with you. If you don't open, I will stay here until your landlord comes and I will tell him the whole story," she says with a rather strange emphasis.

My head is whirling as I try to digest the words. What is happening here? Am I dreaming?

"Sphiwe, what's this? What whole story are you talking about? What's happening?" I ask pleadingly. My head is reeling.

"You know what you did. Open the gate."

"Sphiwe, don't be silly. What did I do? Stop chatting rubbish," I say with contrived aggression.

"Young man, I'm not here to play with you. Please open the stupid gate" she says in a calm but unsettling tone.

She looks tired and worn out. And super irritable. She can do anything right now. Anything at all.

"I will not open, Sphiwe. I'm not joking around. I will not open until you start being sensible and tell me exactly what's going on."

She heaves a deep sigh. Maybe she's about to say exactly what it is that sent her here. I sincerely hope it's not what I think. Except she doesn't. She viciously kicks the gate and says, "Tendai, just open the stupid gate and stop being a petulant little boy." She's breathing heavily and looks on the edge of tears.

I realize I have no other option but to open the gate. My brains are threatening to pop out now. What will I do with two angry women when I couldn't deal with one? I open the gate and she enters, dragging her massive bag. I don't offer help. I'm too exhausted. We don't talk; we just walk slowly to the house. I'm like a lamb being led to the slaughter, whatever it looks like.

We get to the door and Tanya is no longer shouting. My hands are shaking now and I'm struggling to put the key in the hole. Sphiwe looks at me with questioning eyes. I whisper, "My sister is visiting. She's in there."

She doesn't answer. I know it's a silly lie and it will be debunked in less than twenty-five seconds, but it's still something. I open the door and Tanya is sitting on the couch with a calm aggressiveness. Sphiwe comes in and the two ladies lock eyes. No greetings are exchanged. The tension is palpable. I try to lighten the situation by making quick introductions.

Tinashe J. Chipenyu

"Tanya meet Sphiwe. Sphiwe meet Tanya." It works in movies not in real life because Tanya suddenly blurts out.

"I'm pregnant with his child." She removes her jacket so that the bulge is visible. I start feeling like I need a change of pants. Sphiwe is shocked because her face literally drops. She looks at me with burning disgust. She falls on the bed and heaves a deep sigh.

"Who are you? Because you are not Tendai's girlfriend whom he's engaged to. Are you the side chick?"

Tanya smiles, ignoring the thinly-veiled insult. "I'm pregnant with Tendai's child. That's all that matters. His engagement is none of my business," she replies calmly.

I marvel at the lady's ability to always be in control of the narrative. Sphiwe sees that her foe is more formidable than she thought because she doesn't pursue the conversation further. There's a deafening silence in the room and the tension keeps rising. I'm sweating and my heart is pounding yams, whatever pounding yams feels like.

Sphiwe twists her face, heaves and then with a shaky voice says, "I'm also pregnant with your child Tendai, and my mum told me to find the man who did it before dad finds out about it." She starts sobbing.

Tanya doesn't appear shocked, she just smiles. I'm too stunned to do anything. My feet are shaking uncontrollably. Sphiwe's dad is a Pastor of some new-age Pentecostal Church. He's a very respectable man and definitely won't take the news of her daughter being impregnated out of wedlock lightly.

Sphiwe stops sobbing and continues, "Right now, the official line is that I have gone to visit my older sister." She looks at the wall, trying to avoid eye contact perhaps.

I remain silent; so does Tanya. A dark cloud hangs over the room. We stay like that for a good fifteen minutes. There's really nothing to talk about. We are all completely overwhelmed. My life is in utter disarray. I can't believe only a couple of hours ago I was the happiest man alive. Well, that's an exaggeration, but I was happy. Now I'm mired in a deep conspiracy from which I can't extricate myself without doing something drastic. Okay, a lot of drastic things.

Tanya breaks the silence this time and says, "So here it is Tendai. You have two wives. And a girlfriend you are engaged to." I can even afford a smile. Special girl Tanya is. "Ever watched a TV show called *Love and Polygamy?*" she asks, looking at me with intense eyes. "You're about to be that guy. Except that you are poor, so instead of buying us brand new BMWs, you will be buying us cheap second-hand watches, but that's beside the point," Tanya adds, without batting an eyelid or forcing a smile.

Sphiwe is looking at this naturally born stand-up comedian with incredulity and admiration. You can see it in her eyes and the smile she's trying so hard to hide. But everyone is under no illusions regarding the gravity of the situation at hand. Sphiwe rises up and fixes herself a snack. She knows her way around the house; she has been here a couple of times before in very different circumstances. Women's love for food is unparalleled because there's no way I can think of eating while besotted with issues of such magnitude. Tanya is on her phone. She's not typing so she must be reading a book. She casts me furtive, inquisitive glances from time to time. The room is stuffy. It's the tension. My phone buzzes. I'm ignoring WhatsApp messages, but this is a proper text message, so I open it. It's my girlfriend, Nyasha.

"Hi love. You're not opening your WhatsApp. Will be there in 15-20 minutes. I'm spending the night there today. We have lots of things to do x."

I close the message. Switch off my phone and run to the bathroom because suddenly my stomach is unstable and I want to puke. I reach the bathroom sink and I look in the mirror. I am pale as an apparition. No puke comes out, but my head is hot, so I open the tap and start washing my face. I close the tap and come back. I find Sphiwe sitting alone. I don't ask, but she puts two fingers on her lips and looks away. I get the message. Tanya had gone outside to have a smoke. I'm shocked because I didn't know she smoked, and also because she's smoking while pregnant and risking the life of my little one inside her. I can't lash out because there are lots of things that need to be sorted out first, and that most likely will never be sorted out. So I know my rights on the child are very limited.

She comes back with red eyes and I'm not sure if it's the cigarettes or she's been crying. I don't care to ask because I'm too swamped with problems of my own. My girlfriend is on her way, and it's about to be Armageddon out here. I have switched off my phone without replying, so I'm already in big trouble. I don't know what to do because Tanya alone is already too much for me. Imagine three of them. And Nyasha is the most dramatic of them all. She also has a right to go absolutely haywire because she is the official girlfriend who's known to my family, Pastor and friends, including Sphiwe. She's going to raise hell for me from all corners. When she's done with me, I will be worth a rotten loaf of bread in the face of everyone.

I can bolt and leave the girls here and go and stay with one of my friends. But Tadiwa is out of town. He would have at least tried to find a solution; even a temporary one would have given me some relief. Leaving the girls alone is not really wise though because the landlord will be prompted to ask questions. They will tell him and he will launch a manhunt for me. He's that dramatic. Also, I will still have to come back and face the problems head-on.

I could book a lodge for Nyasha and I pretend it was a surprise, but it's too late. She's close by. Besides, she would still want to pass by the house. So I'm in deep mire. The tension in this room is rising again. Sphiwe looks like she has already lost a couple of kilograms. I switch on my phone and the call comes in promptly. It's Nyasha. I hesitate to answer. Both girls give me inquisitive looks, but say nothing. I terminate the call and texts come in, three of them in quick succession. Two of them were sent while the phone was off. She is seething. I'm done for.

The landlord's daughter is back, so she has already opened the gate and Nyasha is literally flying. Woman on a mission. She's visibly exasperated. I'm almost about to collapse. This is an absolute nightmare. I meet her a few metres from the house and try to give her a conciliatory hug, but she brushes me aside and starts telling me off.

"Do you have another girlfriend, Tendai? Tell me now so that I can return your useless ring." She reaches for the door before me and I feel my knees buckle from under me. I might just mess my pants here. We get in at about the same time. She looks at Sphiwe, who just gasps. Then, as if instinctively, she looks at Sphiwe's bag, then at Tanya, who returns a stony stare, then at my tortured face. I avert my eyes. I don't see the slap coming, but it's more venomous than I would have expected because I stagger and rest by the wall. The second one catches me on my left ear and leaves it ringing. I don't really feel the pain because I am too drained to feel anything. The fiasco has left me totally spent.

Suddenly, she starts sobbing. I try to hold her but she pushes me violently aside. I half hope that she angrily storms out, but she doesn't. Instead, she goes and sits on the bed. I have three women here, all of whom expect me to marry them. My shenanigans have caught up with me in the most cruel way. I don't know where to look, because the shame is heavy in my eyes. I don't know where to look, because the shame is heavy in my eyes. I can see Nyasha is no longer wearing the engagement ring, and I'm trying to figure out when she removed it. She's staring into space, muttering something to herself. Tanya is still on the couch, staring intently at the screen of her phone. Sphiwe is playing "Temple Run." I know because she's addicted to the game

Tinashe J. Chipenyu

I realize no introductions have been made. Sphiwe knows Nyasha from photos and that's as far as it goes.

Suddenly, Tanya decides to put Nyasha out of her misery in an ingenious way. "So I take it you are Tendai's beautiful fiancee?" she asks matter-of-factly. Nyasha gives her an incredulous look but nods her head.

"Well, your husband-to-be has machismo. He impregnated the two women you are seeing here." Tanya pauses for effect, then continues, "...so we are you sister wives. You're the first wife, so we will give you the respect you deserve." She speaks in such a matter-of-fact tone, you would think she's serious, or maybe she is. You never know with Tanya.

I expect Nyasha to erupt, but she does something much worse. She stays calm—which is really way out of character for a person of her disposition. Then she looks intently at Tanya, who doesn't bat an eyelid.

Finally, she responds in a measured tone, "So you are proud of it? You are proud of being a sister wife? How low is your self-esteem for you to even utter such demeaning words? Where is your honour?"

Then it happens, Nyasha erupts; the façade is gone. "You are so evil. So evil. How can you knowingly sleep with someone boyfriend? Why do you carry such a malevolent spirit within you?" she's shaking now and she's trying to fight back tears, but the tears are stubborn and they gush out anyway. Now her makeup is messed, but it looks like she doesn't care anymore because she doesn't wipe the tears off. She has bigger problems to deal with. In movies they don't allow tears to mess the make up but this is real life, though it feels like a bad dream. A very bad one.

I don't know what to do now and look aimlessly at the ceiling and the age-old spider webs look like they are staring back. Sphiwe has her head clasped in her hands. I think of going to embrace Nyasha, but she's really in a state I don't want to mess with, so I stay put in my little corner. Tanya isn't even remotely moved and she's looking Nyasha straight in the eye as if daring her to make a move. Nyasha advances toward Tanya. Tanya rises from the couch. They come to within inches of each other. It's an epic standoff. Suddenly, Nyasha pivots and bolts. I hesitate. Following after Nyasha would look like an affront to these two ladies, but not following after her is even worse. She's my real girlfriend, so the ramifications are potentially deadly.

I make for the door but Tanya is at the door before me. She has the keys and she locks the door. Now I'm trapped. My girlfriend has run out in a frenzy into the night, and I'm locked in here with two crazy girls. Well only one of them is really crazy. I'm fuming and confused, but I can't act now because I will aggravate the situation. So I go to my couch and cradle my head in my hands, humming some morbid song. A couple of minutes later, a car pulls up. It's not the landlord's because it stops in front of my house.

My heart threatens to pop out because it has dawned on me what's actually happening. Nyasha has called the Pastor on me and I'm done out here. The knock is belligerent. I take the keys from Tanya who's sitting comfortably on the couch like she has all of life's problems sorted. I hasten to open the door and I'm greeted by the Youth Leader's sanctimonious face. The Pastor is second in line, followed by his wife and Nyasha. The situation has reached a crescendo. My house is too small, too shabby, and too full to accommodate them.

I greet them with a contrived cheerfulness, but they are not in the business for such trivialities. Only the Pastor's wife mumbles a response. Sphiwe has been looking down for a while now and continues in that posture. Tanya is on her phone. She tries to greet the entourage, but she gets stern, accusing faces in response. I lead the entourage to my small kitchen where there are four small chairs and a table.

The meeting starts in earnest. It's simple. I'm relieved of my duties as the Boys' Fellowship Leader with immediate effect. I must choose between being disciplined in front of the whole assembly—that is a public pronouncement in Church that I won't be taking part in Church activities for six months—or be completely banished from the Church for five years. I must marry Nyasha—because I made the vow before the Lord and I can't break it—and pay damages for the two girls.

Easy right? You thought? Not exactly. Tanya erupts. She doesn't care for damages. She wants marriage too, because she deserves it just like Nyasha. She doesn't want to play second fiddle. The Pastor is shocked because his face literally drops. He isn't used to being opposed like that, no less by a girl that young. He tries to speak, but he fails and gestures to his wife to do it on his behalf. The wife clears her throat and fixes Tanya with a stern stare whom, as I expected, fully returns the favour. The Pastor's wife must have noticed it because she starts to speak in a mildly palliative tone.

"Young lady, what we are doing here is for your own good." She pauses for a bit as she tries to pick her words carefully to deescalate the situation. "There is nothing worse than being a second wife to an unwilling husband," she adds.

Tanya lets out a laugh. The Pastor and his wife give each other startled stares.

"How do you know he is unwilling to marry me. Did he tell you that?" Tanya says, looking at me with intense eyes. I avert her gaze and look down at my unpolished floor. The Youth Leader scratches his glistening bald head. You can tell he is ashamed on behalf of his superior.

The Pastor suddenly erupts, "Tendai, where do you find such girls? How in the world did you fall in love with this..."

Tanya interjects him viciously, "Eh, Pastor, this what? What are you trying to imply?" She's breathing heavily. It's the first time since she came that she has looked truly annoyed and out of control. "Please, I respect you, but don't call me names ever again I won't be responsible for how I respond."

I'm still looking at the floor, hoping it can just open up, swallow me whole, and permanently put me out of my misery. The tension is thick in the air. Everyone looks stunned by the words Tanya has just said. Nyasha is covering her face with her hands and she looks terribly distraught. I can see a mild heaving of her chest. Sphiwe has quietly excused herself, and only Heaven knows what she's doing outside.

The Pastor wife tries one more time, "Young girl..."

"I'm not a young girl. I'm twenty-three years old. Old enough to be wife to a much more sensible husband and mother to three children."

Everyone is dumbstruck. The Pastor stands up slowly from his chair and, in a subdued tone, says "I hear you, young woman. You are right. I should not interfere. I will leave you to sort out this mess on your own," he pauses as he wipes sweat that is literally dripping from his brow. "Tendai don't come to see me until you resolve this issue. Do you hear me, son?"

I just nod. I don't have the guts to look at him or at anyone else for that matter. I have been humiliated beyond measure. The worst embarrassment of my life and it's not remotely close to be contestable. The Pastor continues, now in a more authoritative tone, "Nyasha look at me my child."

I steal a glance in her direction and realize her eyes are heavy with tears.

Tinashe J. Chipenyu

"You don't deserve this. Give this foolish boy his ring back. We are canceling the vows right this moment."

Nyasha breaks into tears. Sphiwe is now back and she looks at the scene like it's some horror movie.

Tanya stands up, takes a cigarette from her pocket, and lights it up in front of everyone. The whole house looks in utter horror. She smirks and says, "Your beloved son-in-law impregnated a chronic smoker. So much for a Boys' Fellowship leader, huh?" No one utters a word. She adds as if as an afterthought, "And don't worry about the baby, I don't want it anyway." The Pastor's wife literally jumps from her chair, "Young woman, I beg you, don't think of doing that. Life is sacred. You should not treat it like a simple thing. Please, I beg you."

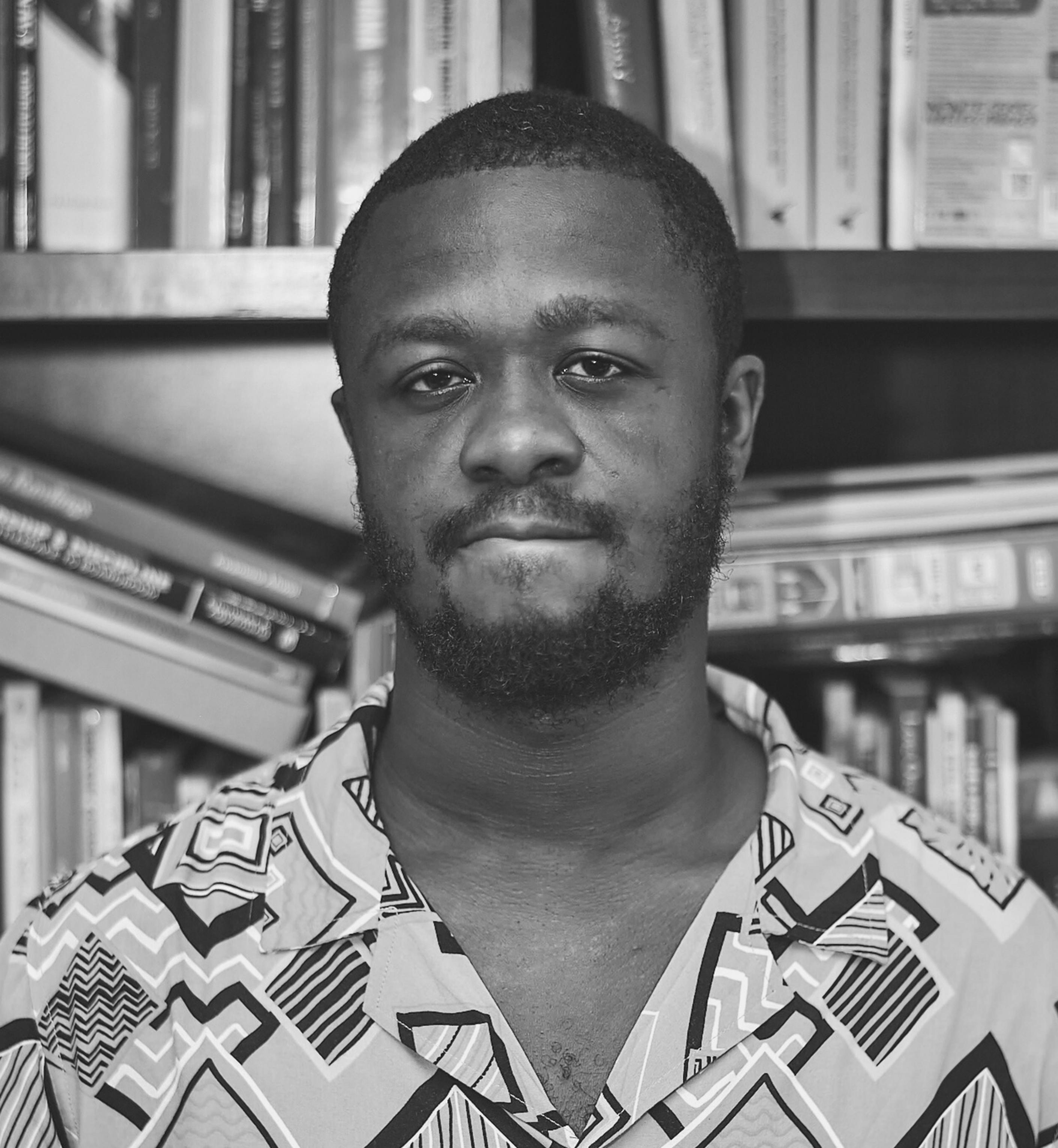
Tanya smiles sardonically, "If you cared so much about the child you would have told your beloved son-in-law to marry me and be responsible for his child, don't you think?"

The Pastor's wife is at a loss for words because she is blinking endlessly without saying anything.

Tanya with a sinister grin she says, "I'm joking. I love the child. I will make sure nothing happens to her. It's unfortunate she has a stupid father." She then excuses herself and goes out.

The Pastor follows immediately after her with the Youth Leader in tow. The Pastor's wife stays behind and goes to where Nyasha is seated and starts whispering something in her ear. Nyasha nods and rises up, and they start walking toward the door. I can't believe what has just happened.

Sphiwe is looking at me with murderous eyes. Being the Twitter fanatic that she is, I might already be trending for the wrong reasons. I open my Twitter, check her account and realize that she has already blocked me. I go to my burner account, search her name again and notice she has tweeted three consecutive "LOLs." That shows the magnitude of her anger in a new light. I feel a strong headache descending and all of a sudden the room is spinning. I try to stabilise myself, but I realize my falling is inevitable. Last thing I remember is a figure coming to where I have fallen but my vision is blurry and I can't tell who it is.



Akwasi Addai

Akwasi Addai from Ghana is an all-around writer and musician who is on a passionate journey for creative freedom. He places no limits on his creativity and makes use of various forms of writing, including screenwriting, fiction, and songwriting. Akwasi now operates on a freelance basis as a gig writer.

He also goes by the stage name Akwasi Marley and has recently released his debut studio album *Renegade*, available at online music stores. Watch his music video for the track [Child Song](#) on YouTube.

[Follow @akwasimarley on Instagram](#)



Akwasi Addai

I am Johnny Green

Day One The Journey

Sitting alone on my patio one afternoon, I put down my joint and heaved a sigh. A butterfly came, landing on the mound of weed next to my laptop. I took that as a bad sign. *Perhaps this marks the beginning of my writer's block*, I thought. Nevertheless, I continued working on my manuscript, on words of poetry I still remember:

*I grasp at the shards,
Through the hot sands of another day,
Without burning my fingertips,
On unrealized promise.*

Unsatisfied with these words, I deleted everything. My fingers were ready, but my imagination had nothing. I shut down my laptop and grabbed the joint, putting my lighter to good use. Then, laying on my seat, I took a long drag.

I had only two weeks to submit a rewrite of my novel; my agent wasn't extending the deadline anymore.

"It still needs more work," she claimed, having read my first draft. "There are certain weaknesses with the structure of your story you must change."

Unfortunately, I was in the habit of taking my privileges for granted. Only after I had risen from my seat with a sharp sting on my ass-cheeks did I realize I'd been sitting buck naked this whole time, a desperate move to regain my writing mojo.

My living room looked creepy and filthy from all angles. Many cigarette butts, overflowing ashtrays, and empty liquor bottles crowded the front table and the floor. I was watching Scarface for about the millionth time, enjoying every minute of it as though it were my first. After a while, I grabbed my leather kit and opened it. There were handy wipes, a hand sanitizer, little vials of cologne, Visine, mouthwash, breath mints, and a pair of scissors. I opened the lid of a capsule and poured out some herbs. After setting apart the sticks and seeds, I pulled out a sheet of Rizla, and rolled myself another one.

Whenever people asked about my habits, I always evaded giving a direct answer, being of the mind that one responds to such questions from the crust, to the mantle, down to the core. I'd had my fair share of substance abuse. Those were days like lost dogs. A person felt more compelled these days, amidst a dying economy, to stop following conventions and bandwagons, desisting all dreams, all passions and life-long journeys.

I was drinking orange juice when the call came. I had been expecting Bill's call since two in the afternoon. When my phone finally rang, I stared at it and let it ring some more, as though I was teaching it a lesson for keeping me waiting. I answered the call and, saying nothing right away, just listened.

"Wossop chaley? I dey your house ein front oh," Bill said to me.

I told him I'd be right there and went to get dressed for our journey.

We were driving across town, looking cool in our sunglasses. The sun was just about to set. I plunged onto a motorway and turned down the Hip-Hop music Bill had increased to the highest volume. We hadn't shared a word when he reached for the tuner, yet I was sure he did it to keep himself entertained, not to reduce any awkward silence. It was a two-way silence between two friends who had natural camaraderie. Bill was used to my having moments of silent reflection, especially while driving. We had our differences. We had a lot in common too. He was everyone's go-to guy when it came down to making moves; a certified hustler.

"So what be the level for the day?" I asked him, as he rolled a spliff.

"Your man dem say som move, but dem give me vague details" he responded.

"Dem no tell you what I dey do for this whole equation inside?"

"At all" Bill replied.

We were to meet up with Fish and Latiff at a Shell filling station somewhere in Kokomlemle. They arrived looking tough as usual. Latiff wore an all-white djellaba, a duffle bag hanging over his shoulder. Fish wore a polo shirt and denim shorts. These two were known as the best of comrades and were quite often mistaken as brothers. It was said that wherever one was spotted, the other was just around the corner.

Before we resumed our journey, I insisted that Fish and Latiff give me more information about the location to which we were headed.

"Oh, we just dey go Aburi side," Fish said to me.

"Which side of Aburi?" I asked.

"Som side we no fit talk, unless we show you as we dey go," Latiff responded just to fob me off.

Their sentences, in this way, always complemented each other. Whenever Fish and Latiff proposed a road trip, they did so with such devious attitudes that one could only suspect they had hidden agendas.

"What we dey go do for Aburi? And what e dey your bag inside?" I asked Latiff, looking at him with shrewd eyes.

"Chaley, you be lie detector? Why all these questions?"

Before sundown, we set off from Kokomlemle and were en route to Aburi. Everyone chipped in some money for gas. I could not afford to bear another cost on their account.

My Audi was no more than a hotbox of hashish and marijuana plumes as we sped, with a floating sensation, along the two-lane Kumasi highway. A motorway heading in our direction flanked us on the right of the interstate. On our left, another highway went in the opposite direction. The moonlight looked unblemished across the road as lots of heavy-duty trucks zipped past us and a vast complex of poorly-planned housing developments stretched off on both sides. Further inland towards a main intersection, we branched left in the direction of Berekuso village.

Although in our possession we had a quart of rum and a bottle of whiskey, Fish was of the opinion that it was only right we added to our collection. Everyone concurred, and so we stopped on the way for more drinks at the liquor store. At the cashier's post, I saw my reflection on the metallic counter. My eyes were red, my skin looked pale, and my clothes were dirty. In fact, I was repulsive. I tried not to breathe on the cashier, and without a "thank you", I hurried out immediately after the transaction.

The rural community of Berekuso connects with Aburi through a narrow bush-road filled with deadly potholes. It takes a driver over forty minutes to arrive at Aburi. The road was also known as a hideout for thieves and harm-doers, and so it was deemed unsafe at night. Once we got to the bush-road, the drifting sensation with which we began our voyage gave way to a new sensation of running on a treadmill, going nowhere.

Akwasi Addai

I suddenly heard an awful noise. A shadow fell upon us as the sky became full of huge bats swooping over dark, grey clouds. Bats? What in heaven's name were they up to at this ungodly hour and in these parts of the tropics? Everything then went completely silent again, and I wondered briefly if what just occurred happened in reality at all or in my head.

The guys took no notice of my reaction to the flying animals. They were busily having discussions about various violent experiences they had had. This was a normal topic for Fish and Latiff, whose language never wandered far from 'damage' and 'demolish':

"Som foolish trotro driver ever scratch we for N-1 make we pursue am erh, that day come see where the power lies," Fish began.

Latiff recalled the story and carried on: "We cross am noor the driver get down boot! He fool papa! I collect ein key and phone all from the car inside!" Latiff laughed.

"I hear noor your man smash the side-mirrors! FIIIM! FIIIM!!"

"Hoh, I no shia am body kraa! I break ein side mirrors san smash ein windscreen! I san take the mate ein head, smash the bonnet, make ein blood all smear ma shada top! Aboalaidat! Next time he go take ein morda come scratch my car, foolish man!" Fish said all this with grave malice, and Bill laughed all along.

After these shocking discussions, they talked about many more things: the past events of an unforgettable rave night, about a fast-approaching heavy-weight boxing match, and about the heavy rain clouds that had just begun to form.

Around nine o'clock, we arrived at a rural community called Akuapem. It was at the hub of Aburi's motorway network. Aburi is well-known for its many highlands, favourable climatic conditions, and the hospitality of its natives. Many tourists from all over the world arrive here each year for these reasons. In the unique history of its development, the Basel missionary Andreas Riis was the first to settle. Other missionaries followed soon after. A large number of them established various churches and advocated for the construction of the Aburi-Accra road. There was a boulevard that ran along a cliff where the air was hard to breathe, and the foul smell of choked gutters rode with its breeze. Several narrow streets were lined with ramshackle structures, jammed together with thatch roofs and iron sheets.

I parked my car at the foot of a forest hill called Abetema. While we continued the journey on foot, along a narrow path that meandered through the heart of the forest, Fish and Latiff finally came round to explaining the motive behind our journey. We were headed for the home of a man named Alaska, a drug-dealing associate of theirs who had spent over two decades in 'the game' and apparently just retired. They respected him a lot. And in their opinion, the man was too experienced to be put out to pasture from their line of work.

"If I tell you say this be the guy who dey supply most of the louder for town, you go believe me?" Fish asked.

"Oh why not?" said Bill. "Sumbro he dey stay Aburi hilltop dier why he no go deal?"

"He no be dealer oh," Latiff pointed out. "He be supplier. You dey barb? Difference dey. He get greenhouse den U.V lights all. He dey do am indoors."

"So why he wan shun the business?" I asked.

"Hmm, this matter be too deep," Fish said. "Why?" I asked again.

"All dey mong we dey go ein der," Latiff responded. "He call me yestee, say he get somtin give we so make we come."

"This one dier som inheritance for cry oh. Anaa?" Bill said.

"That be all you know, kwasia!" Fish retorted to Bill. "I get feeling say he go give we som block. If not he go take ein merchandise som dash we."

"Which kind merchandise?" I asked.

"You dier you dey ask questions oh," Latiff responded

"Make you no shiver, whatever be the case we go sort you," Fish told me. "If it turns out to be dope, we go sell give you then give you the money. Unless you want sell am yourself."

The prospect of earning from this deal was tempting enough. You see, my utility bills were long overdue, and I needed money. Nonetheless, I felt manipulated and taken for granted, and I realized how much I had trifled with my own priorities.

About halfway up the hill, the heavy rain clouds seemed to say *now is the time to teach these fools a lesson*. Thunder rumbled with a deep voice, followed by flashes of lightning. We were forced to take shelter under a tree. At first, nobody spoke for a while. Then I decided to break the silence by plunging once more into the subject of Alaska.

"So Alaska, anytime he get visitors, this be the stress they for go through?" I asked, wiping my face with the back of my hand.

"You think say e be joke?" Latiff chuckled.

"But how road no dey wey he dey stay mansion inside?" Bill asked.

"Massa, you get sense pass am?" replied Latiff. "Are you calling him a fool for building his house here or what?"

"How long has he lived here?" I asked.

"More than ten years now," Fish replied.

Latiff drew his finger over his eyes to clear the water from his face.

"You know say som time ago I get som hint say Alaska wan quit?" Fish said to Latiff. "But I no take am serious."

"Really? When that?" Latiff asked.

"Oh, like two years ago. I dey kai waa. That day he come back from Nogokpo wey we jam am make he prepare som akple give we."

"Yeah, I dey kai that day. But na where I dey the time he hint you?"

"That time na you bed. Me and am yarn throughout the night."

"And what was the hint exactly?" I asked.

"Then he dey talk say life be too short chaley. Wey if he no slow down ah, yawa fit pai. You see then things som."

"You sure say e no be dying he dey die?" This was Bill talking.

"At all," Fish responded. "It be the job noor. It be like that time na ein wife dey preg plus ein first kiddie, Zion."

Akwasi Addai

"Of course. I mean what do you expect?" Bill took a beat. "He get wife, he get kiddie, he get money, he get house. You no fit hustle forever." He blew his nose and rubbed it with the back of his hand.

"Who tell you say you no fit hustle forever?" Latiff raised his voice.

"So you go take this business go your grave inside?" Bill teased.

"If the old man taya, make he bed erh? Money no be everything. No be everybro he go fit kill ein body sekoff dough like you."

"Kwasia! Then what you dey do for here?" Latiff was vexed. "If you no dey luv money go house erh? What you dey do for bush inside at twelve midnight?"

We were all soaking wet when we finally arrived at Alaska's home. The rain had diminished, and the shrill tremor of forest insects was heard. The compound was modest, sitting on a few acres. There were neat rows of ornamental flora and a pleasant vista of the skyline. I was at a threshold, waiting to open the door to a new chapter of waywardness. In my mind, Bill was right about the need to draw a line between greed and morality. But Latiff had put him in his place by pointing out the hypocrisy in his words.

We had travelled a long way. And it all boiled down to money in the end. The Good Book says: the love of money is the root of all evil. But the lack of it yields as much evil too. Perhaps I was justified for taking a desperate measure in a desperate time. But the road to riches has no end, and this was not the end of our road; this was merely the beginning of another journey. And though it may appear we ride together in solidarity, every man knew he stood for himself in his own quest for freedom.

Day Two New Friends

I had done very little work on my manuscript. My writer's block was getting worse by the day. I could feel myself sinking within depths of incapacity. At times, I blamed my laziness and tried to put an end to it, but such resolves were always short-lived. I had made it a point to let writing take up the most space in my life, no matter how my circumstances changed. But these days, whenever I sat facing my laptop, my motivation to write came only from my body and not my soul. But how can one be productive when one's flesh is willing but one's mind lacks inspiration?

My agent had pointed out certain 'structural weaknesses' in my story and, being an editor herself, suggested some changes meant to give my novel a more 'conventional' touch. She made it clear, however, in the course of our correspondence, that I, the author, had overall creative control; it would be wrong for my work to be compromised by her coercion.

I had put off reading her e-mail long enough, and now the day of reckoning had come. And so I read her letter out loud to myself:

Johnny,

Going through your novel again, it's clear you are your own protagonist, and so of course you'd have a strong opinion of who he is and how he should behave. However, the drawn-out fashion with which he outlines your narrative is not satisfactory. Try having the plots move at a quicker pace and let's discuss on Monday.

Esme-Barnes

Simply breaking the news of my inability to meet her deadline was uncalled for. Also, the idea of absenting myself from our next meeting was out of the question, as I was already guilty of such misconduct. If only I had half as much conviction as Mrs Barnes, I would have replied to her e-mail without biting the words: *your suggestion is duly noted, but I prefer my work remains the same, save for a few minor changes.* But one does not write about such matters. They would have to be broken down gently in conversation.

I re-ignited my joint and leaned against the wall. After two or three tokes, I knocked the smouldering head out and stored what was left for another time. Bill and I had agreed to meet at a residential diner at Haatso. We were to head to town thereafter for business.

The evening slant of the sun at twilight turned the sky a reddish-gold colour as we weaved in and out of traffic on the road to East-Legon. We were bumping over potholes, covering our eyes every now and then from the sun's glare.

"So where you hide the merch' for?" Bill asked me, his eyes glued to his iPhone.

I gave him a dirty look to which he was oblivious. "It dey ma boot inside," I replied curtly.

"You sure say water no go enter like last time?"

I did not dignify this with a response. Bill jumped at every opportunity to remind me about the one time our merchandise got damaged because of my mistake. I had hidden them in a secret compartment in my trunk, which unfortunately got flooded by rainwater. This was our third or so business trip since Latiff and Fish granted us some amount of drugs to sell at our discretion. We apportioned a minor volume for our personal use and were selling the greater remainder to certain designated buyers of our choosing. The drugs were kept at my place – a kilo of high-grade marijuana, seventy-five pills each of Molly and Ecstasy, and a bag full of magic mushrooms. Thanks to the profits I had made so far, I paid off my utility bills as well as the costs for the upkeep of my car. Now all I had on me was a hundred and fifteen cedis plus some loose coins.

"Guy, what and what you say Oga go buy again?" I asked Bill.

He seemed bothered. "This be like the hundredth time you dey ask me this question."

"I dey do calculations for ma head inside that be why," I said.

Bill shook his head before responding: "He say make we just come. Nothing spoil."

"What if we reach ein yard wey the merchandise I take come no be the merchandise he dey want?"

"Why? Which merch' you take come?" He asked.

"Which merch' I take come?" I echoed. "Which merch' you figa say I take come?"

Bill hesitated for a moment and said: "I gave you the benefit of the doubt, brethren."

"The benefit of your Morda!" I yelled, at which point he spoke in his defence:

"This no be the first time we dey deal plus Oga."

"Oga no be the only person we dey deal with tonight. Abi you mention som Nicky babe like that?" I asked.

"Naa. That linking no be confirmed."

Akwasi Addai

"Waa look! Wey you no tell me for phone top? Rydee e check like we over-equip wanna body."

Bill reached for the aux cable and connected his iPhone. The ensuing bars of a Hip-Hop track now blared through the speakers.

"Ma guy," he said, bumping his head to the beat. "It be like say you make paranoid small, you for relax."

We drove past an elegant boulevard and soon arrived at Bethel Villa, a massive residence made of premium brick. Home to the Honourable Sunday Okoli, otherwise known as Oga Sunday, it held a more supreme appearance than any other dwelling within the community. There was an ongoing festivity in and out of the compound: many posh cars were parked outside and loud, Afrobeat music wafted in the air. I drove my Audi back and forth in an effort to park in between two cars. At the same time, Bill called Oga to inform him about our arrival.

"How far now?" Oga's voice boomed over the loudspeaker.

"We dey your house ein front, chairman," Bill answered.

"Oya, come inside. You no see party for ground? Or you want make I take ma back come carry you enter?"

Bill was visibly thrilled at this invitation. He sprung out of my car, walked to the rear, popped my trunk and hauled out the merchandise.

The evening air was cool and pleasant. Several groups of men and women sat together at tables. Others stood in twos and threes, sipping beers and whiskeys. A number of men wore suits, but most sported what appeared to be the uniform of the occasion: very expensive *Agbadas* and *Batakaris* with intricate designs. There was an unmistakable air of covetousness; we were clearly in the midst of bandits. The Honourable Sunday Okoli was a prominent man in the Nigerian community. His businesses spanned over a wide range of activities – one could hardly know the extent of his wealth, much less the details of his dealings. I imagined his home as some sort of embassy for gameboys and con artists.

When Oga came to the door, he was already intoxicated. On seeing us, he rushed forward and gave us both hugs. His wife and two children joined in this excited welcoming. It felt quite unusual.

"Oya come in now," he said. "I wait you taya. This house na your own."

A greasy-looking man in the sitting room seemed unfriendly as we entered. There were a few other men smoking cigarettes. Oga, who had excused himself briefly, now arrived with a tray and a pair of scissors and handed this to Bill to start processing some buds. The greasy-looking man now broke into a broad smile. The gap in his teeth looked like a vacant plot in a slum.

"What you guys go drink?" Oga asked politely. "We get whiskey, Alomo and palm wine."

"I'll take palm wine," I said.

Bill ordered whiskey, and Oga instructed one of his stewards to serve us.

"See this yeye man oh," he said jovially to Bill. "Today you come ma house dey drink whiskey. How many times I don tell you to visit?"

"I no wan disturb you, that be why," said Bill modestly.

"Which kind disturbance? Oya what dey go on? Weytin you bring for me?"

"Today I come full volume oh," Bill replied.

Oga drew up the sleeves of his robes and re-adjusted himself on his seat. "Na so?" He chuckled.

"Your mandem fit ron tins," said Bill. "There's plenty for all."

Bill motioned to the duffle bag on the floor, and Oga instructed another one of his stewards to take it to the adjoining room. Our drinks arrived soon enough. The young man handed me a calabash, raised the pot on his left knee and poured out palm wine. I gulped it down, waiting for the voice in my head to pronounce it good or bad. The voice spoke and it was good.

"Today na good day," said Oga. "The boys all confirm."

"That's what's up," I said excitedly.

Our conversations digressed from this to that and then finally to the notion of a man rising from 'rags to riches'. Bill spoke first – it was he who brought up the topic – but the best insight came from Oga himself, who amongst us had personal experience in the matter. He started with a saying, and I quote: "There's a fine line between what matters, what doesn't, and what we think matters but doesn't." His point being: should a person maintain the illusion that the most important things in life are 'money' and 'power', such a person lives in a vacuum. He likened an order of the true essence of life to a pyramid ranked in levels from the apex to its base. At the base, dwells the carnal ideals our society worships. And at the apex, dwells true knowledge and wisdom that could only be attained by virtue. Naturally, I found this ironic coming from a rich man, but Oga had not always been rich. In fact, good fortune only smiled on him a couple of years ago.

"If na one thing I learn in this my forty-five years of living," he went on to say, "It be say nothing happens for nothing. There is always a cause and effect to everything."

Bill excused himself to answer a phone call and returned with a flurry of excitement. Something had come up, he said, and we had to leave. Although Oga had left with his characteristic jovialness to the adjoining room to bring back our bag, I could tell he was disappointed, if not offended, by our sudden decision to go.

As soon as Oga was out of earshot Bill said to me: "Chaley, it be the Nikki babe wey call oh."

"You dey lie!" I replied in disbelief.

"I make wild, guy." He explained: "She say she need som grade so make I come ein der. I tell am say me and ma guy bi dey walk, wey she say no yawa, she sef som ein girl too dey."

When Oga came back, our bag was emptied out; it appeared his people had purchased all our merchandise. We had made more money in these past few hours than in all our days of selling.

Nikki's apartment was a two-bedroom suite on the twenty-seventh floor of The Villagio Condominium. It had a view that embraced the sparkling bright lights of the city. We got there around nine o'clock, and Nikki was already performing a seductive dance to some acoustic music. Her friend Operbia was quietly seated when Bill introduced me as his 'writer-friend'.

"Really? What kind of stuff do you write?" Nikki asked me.

"Creative stuff, pretty much," I replied coolly.

Akwasi Addai

"Sounds vague," she snickered. "Any works of yours I might have seen?"

"I'm working on my first novel," I said.

"Oh okay, and how's that coming?"

I told her everything was quite alright except my writer's block.

"Don't worry," Nikki said. "It happens sometimes."

Her music had been playing since we entered; an acoustic guitar with keyboard tunes and soulful vocals. Nikki was a sort of B-list celebrity in the Ghanaian music scene. Come to think of it, there was some hype circulating around her at the time, but it did not occur to me then.

By now, a smoking bong had been going round. Operbia did not indulge. She hadn't shared a word with us yet, but I could tell she was listening to our every word. She wore a bodycon dress with a geometric pattern print, looking thicker than a bowl of oatmeal. Her skin looked silky-smooth, and her fingernails were cherry red. There was something about her – perhaps it was the dress she wore, perhaps it was her unassuming nature – it sparked in me an irresistible urge to have her at the mercy of my loins.

"Are you guys hungry?" Nikki asked us. "We've got Kenkey and fish."

"Bring am make we chop!" Bill replied, a little too eagerly.

The ladies went into the kitchen and came back with Kenkey and a bottle of red wine. Operbia had garnished my plate with diced vegetables and filled my glass with wine. She then joined me a few seats away at the dining table.

"Can I ask you a question?" This was the first thing she said to me. "What do you get when you smoke?" she asked.

A fishbone got caught up in my throat, and I tried without success to swallow it down.

"But I didn't answer your first question," I argued, trying to conceal my surprise.

"What is it?" she asked.

"No, you can't ask me a question."

"Very funny," she said with a horrid, sarcastic tone. Then she picked up a magazine from the table and began to read. I was about to remind her that it's rude to read in front of your guests when she said: "Smoking is bad for you," without even looking up at me.

"Everything's bad for you these days," I replied.

"I've been trying to get my cousin to stop," Operbia continued. "But she's stubborn just like you."

"Who's your cousin?" I asked. Operbia made a head gesture towards Nikki, who by now had snuggled up to Bill in the living room.

When I was done eating, she came for my plate and then went into the kitchen, wiggling her backside. It was as perfect as her front. And so I followed her, admiring each step she took and the way her slippers clapped against the soles of her feet. I offered her a hand with the dishes, but she maintained an insistent "No!" I could only stand there and watch. After a while, I moved closer to her, tempted to put my arm around her waist, but I decided it might be premature.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked instead. "What's your story?"

"My story?" she repeated. "You're the writer, not me."

"Ei, why do you have something against writers or what?"

"Of course not," she said.

"You think writing is a waste of time, don't you?"

"I was only joking. Please don't chew me."

"You never answered my question though," I said. "What do you do?"

Operbia told me she had just completed university. She would begin her national service next year in a couple of months.

"National service where?" I asked.

"I'd be working as an administrative clerk at ministries."

"And after your service what's next?"

"My dad says I should go to law school. But I don't know, I might start a business or something."

I could tell Operbia was a most complicated woman. Her voice carried the confidence that comes with beauty and brains. With a girl like her, what was required was a gentle prodding at regular intervals, without any rushed actions that are bound to give away your intentions.

The living room was now empty with Nikki and Bill gone. Operbia and I sat on the sofa having 'philosophical' conversations for what seemed a full hour. Her theories and ideas were deeply-rooted and, though difficult to admit, somehow resonated with me. We would be talking, for instance, about metaphysics, and she would say: "Science and technology is a product of Alchemy. And Alchemy a product of sorcery and magic." Or, perhaps, our discourse would veer towards the subject of divinity, and she will say: "Surely, there is a God, but there are many other gods, and many other realms of existence."

I decided it was time to quit this pussy-footed business and be as direct and straightforward about my intentions as possible. What's the worst that could happen? A rejection? Big deal! *You'd get over it in the morning*, I told myself. So I moved closer to her and called her name, "Operbia," looking deep in her eyes. "I know we only just met and this might sound cliché but... I'm feeling some type of connection here."

There was a long and awkward silence. Operbia sat up on the sofa.

"You don't know me," she responded softly. "I'm not who you think I am."

"I'm already fond of you," I told her. "I've got love for you right here, right now. Isn't that enough?"

The smile on her face looked faintly ironic, as though she had been wondering what took me so long.

"What are you trying to say, Johnny?" she asked, smiling.

"Operbia, you're killing me. I'm just trying to capitalize on the heat of this moment. You're not a small girl."

Akwasi Addai

"What heat," she joked. "Anyway, what do you want from me?"

I smiled and asked, "What do you think of loving *in* the moment?"

I don't remember who kissed who first, but she was in my arms the next moment. She had pressed her body against mine, her perfume smelt like nothing I'd ever smelt, her juicy breasts and mass of dark hair got stuck in my mouth. She had clasped her arms around my neck and her feet around my waist. She called me darling, loved one, sweetheart. And she pulled me down to the ground, bursting with energy. It was more than I had bargained for. A strong sense of pride rushed down my spine, and I was glad this was happening, for I had for too long been without a woman.

Operbia picked herself up from the floor, pulling something out of her hair. She sat facing me and said: "Johnny darling, we can't have sex tonight. I'm sorry if that's not enough for you."

I suppose I should have burst into tears or something, but I didn't. "Sorry for what?" I asked. "I'll take whatever you'll give me."

Day Three Getting Serious

For three or four weeks, I had been bracing myself for this moment. I walked into Mrs Barnes' library that afternoon, thinking I was fully prepared for our meeting. It was the Christmas season. The opulent library looked festive with coloured bright lights and a Christmas tree. After waiting for a while, I decided to check out some of her books. There was a decorative set of English encyclopaedias, *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer, *Daughters of Africa* by Margaret Busby, and a couple other high-society novels written by women.

I flipped through a few pages of an encyclopaedia and settled down to read it closely. I was a little tipsy. You see, I can't speak for every drinker, but whenever I take alcohol in adequate amounts, my body language flows more lucidly, removing all signs of anxiety.

At the faint sound of footsteps, I rose to my feet, putting the encyclopaedia away. Mrs Barnes was standing at the doorway. For a mother of three, she still looked very well-kept. She carried authority in every inch of her bearing, and seemed perfectly capable of standing her ground next to a beautiful young girl. Mrs Barnes was the sole proprietor of H-CONNECT, a very reputable HR firm in Ghana. Being passionate also about African literary arts, she had recently become an editor and an agent.

"Hello Johnny," she greeted me, making her way into the library and sitting on a red velvet chair. She had a bunch of files in hand.

"Hello Mrs Barnes," I grinned, sitting back down.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"No problem here ma'am," I said.

"Good to know. How was your weekend? And how's the writing coming?"

I told her my weekend was awesome and the writing was coming along just fine.

"Okay, let's get right to it then," she said. "I don't know if you received my last e-mail? I expressed concerns about your 'pacing.'"

"My pacing with which part of my story exactly?" I was quick to ask in my defence. Mrs Barnes had already sensed a certain defiance in my attitude, which did not bode well for the rest of our conversation.

"Okay, Johnny, I'm sure this goes without saying, but you and I..." she accompanied the words 'you and I' with a gesture of her forefinger, "we're on the same side here."

"I know we're on the same side..."

"Let me finish, please," Mrs Barnes interjected. "Don't get me wrong, Johnny, I'm a big fan of being unconventional. But in any case, some conventions must apply. You have written your story in a certain drawn-out fashion that makes it feel monotonous, at some point."

"Monotonous? How?"

"Your narrator is isolated throughout the novel. All he does is talk about himself and his surroundings. There's a lot of unnecessary information that does not push your story forward. At first, he strikes me as a cool and eccentric character, but then there's about three or four pages describing a very long scene in the lavatory. And no one wants to see that."

"You are talking about my first draft, which has changed a great deal," I began. "And even Johnny isn't the only character in that draft. Other characters come in eventually. Besides, he is an introvert; it's only right he spends time by himself."

"I counted the number of times you used the word 'I' in chapters one, two and three. Do you know what it was?" she asked.

"Unless you tell me," I responded.

"Seventy-two times." Mrs Barnes let this sink in. "It means your readers must endure reading 'I... I... I' over and over again at the beginning of your book. How can you expect them to keep turning the pages?"

"I can't please everybody," I said, ignoring her valid point. "I don't expect everyone to read or love my story. Every novel is basically an acquired taste. And even all these issues you've mentioned have been rectified in my second draft. I've introduced the other characters much earlier in the story, so it doesn't feel as monotonous as before."

"Okay, well, that's good." She smiled shrewdly. "So when can I get a copy of this second draft?"

"You'll have to give me more time, please," I said. "I'm not done yet."

"On a scale of one to ten, how far will you say you are?" Mrs Barnes looked in my eyes as though she sought the answer embedded in my soul.

"I would say eight point five."

"Eight point five? How interesting." She knew I was lying.

Just then, a most sophisticated-looking young woman walked in on our meeting. Mrs Barnes introduced her to me as Ms Mabel Akoto. She had arrived that very minute from the airport and hadn't even gone home to wash off the weariness of her journey, she said. I thought she looked stunning enough with all her fatigue.

"Are you the novelist Esme keeps telling me about?" Ms Akoto asked me as soon as Mrs Barnes left the library to answer a phone call.

"Aspiring novelist," I corrected her. "I'm still working on it."

"I see," she nodded. "But do you think novels are still relevant today? Do people actually still read novels at all these days?"

Akwasi Addai

I tried to hide the resentment at first, but it soon flooded my face. It was as if the question, having lingered behind my subconscious, had now finally broken free thanks to her. My feelings must have shown.

Ms Akoto leaned forward to explain: "Please don't take any offense. I'm only making a general point, which I think is interesting."

"It wouldn't stop me from writing," I said. "It's a matter of principle to me."

She asked me what my novel was about, and I told her it was an autobiographical story about a struggling writer trying to find the light at the end of the tunnel.

"So it's about you?" she asked.

"It's loosely based on actual experiences," I answered.

Ms Akoto wondered if I had ever tried my hands at screenwriting. She ran a film production company in the city, and they had been looking for good writers. I must confess, I was a little intimidated by her sophisticated and classy manner. The way she spoke, she must have spent her childhood in England or something. I took her card and told her she would be hearing from me.

Before sunset, I was out of Mrs Barnes' mansion and on my way to Spintex, having spoken with Operbia over the phone. It was her birthday today. And she had invited me over to her house for a Christmas dinner party.

"Where are you? Where have you reached? I thought I told you to get here by six!" Operbia sounded agitated over the phone.

I told her to keep calm. I would be there shortly.

I had a strange, almost unreal feeling about the way things were turning out between Operbia and me. It was amusing and yet vaguely disturbing at the same time. I had not always felt indifferent about women. On the contrary, I had gotten quite intimate with a considerable number of women in my past. But these intimacies, which I regarded as passionate, were neither long-lasting nor sincere. There was always a part of me, an alter ego, which seemed to rise above it all, eyeing the other me below with cynical disdain as I copulated with the women in my affairs. But things were different with Operbia. We had started off intimately, and this set the tone for what was to come in our relationship. It was devoid of the kind of mind games that usually come with the approach of 'wooing' a girl. This was a good thing. For though it was not love at first sight, it was certainly real. In spite of this, I didn't feel I had any rightful claims on her; I had not slept with her yet, and our relationship was not based on commitment but on the warm current of whatever providence had brought us together.

Operbia came from one of the wealthiest families in the city. Their mansion was built like a manor; what it may have lacked in excessive spreads of land and the splendour of the English countryside, it made up for in bold exterior decorations and contemporary architecture. The living room had museum-quality art decorations of stylized Egyptian figures and greyish pink furniture with framed poetry on the walls.

At the dinner party, Operbia wore a short, beaded evening dress with a gorgeous print. She started off nicely by thanking everyone for making it to her "not so fancy" Christmas dinner party.

"One of the saddest things about being born on Christmas is that you can never really tell whether people are celebrating you or Jesus," Operbia joked and everyone laughed.

"Aaaw, too bad," said one of the ladies, matching her words with a tilt of her head. I thought I recognized her from somewhere, but I couldn't put a finger on it.

"No offense to Jesus," Operbia continued. "I wasn't born in a manger, but I could use some frankincense right now," she winked shrewdly at the other lady.

It was then I remembered who she was: a schoolmate from my university. Apart from Operbia and me there were five others in the dining room – the lady I just remembered from college whose name was Yvonne, her boyfriend Jeffrey, Operbia's older brother Kojo, and their eldest sister Eraqua who had arrived late with her fiancé.

Dinner was rice and stew with stir-fried pork and grilled chicken. I had set out with a huge appetite, so I didn't spare the food at all. While Operbia flirted with me, her friend Yvonne did not seem happy about this. I imagined her wondering *who is this guy acting all cosy around my bestie*. I tried to re-establish our connection, but she did not remember me and didn't seem to care particularly. I was very offended by this and immediately formed a poor opinion of her.

Our conversation that night started on a mild note, but in no time things got heated into an intellectual debate. When the discussion turned to the harsh realities of being an up-and-coming artiste in today's world I made what I still think was a most valid and timely intervention.

Operbia initially stated a generally agreeable point: that talent will never be enough for success. She elaborated that one needs an enabling platform and the virtue of perfect timing as well. Perfect timing involved meeting the right people at the right time, which meant having the right platforms. But she implied a role of providence in this matter, and this did not sit well with Yvonne, who disagreed with Operbia over what Yvonne called 'the Beyoncé theory'.

"I will always recommend the Beyoncé theory for every creative's journey," Yvonne begun. "Beyoncé's talent wasn't out of this world or anything, she just had the right drive, and she put in a lot of work." Her accent had moved closer to that of an American.

"Wey na she san too get swag," Kojo added.

"Yes, but her strongest element was the amount of hard work she put in. Her body of work is humongous." Yvonne kept on blabbering about Beyoncé and all her attributes, and everyone else joined in this testimonial, talking about the fact that her family wasn't broke, and that they put in a lot of work and money into her becoming a superstar.

"Nobody is saying her family was broke, and nobody's disputing her hard work," Operbia responded. "Everybody puts in work. You are talking about her staying relevant as a mainstream artiste, but I'm talking about the breakthrough itself. They are two different things."

"But nothing about Beyoncé's career involved perfect timing or luck. Her parents were her managers, and everyone else in Destiny's Child was essentially there to put her up."

I thought Yvonne was talking out of her ass. It was then I had my flash of insight. It appeared the basis of our argument had veered from the struggles of an emerging artiste, and now everyone was just going on and on about the superstar's accolades.

"How many artistes do you think have parents as supportive and resourceful as Beyoncé's?" This was the first point I made. "It's a rare case. Most of them make it without their parent's money or support. We're talking about the average here. You can't expect every talent to adopt the Beyoncé theory when their families aren't supportive enough."

Akwasi Addai

"Exactly!" Operbia exclaimed, suddenly encouraged by my words. "It's like an equation. Talent is just one factor out of a bunch of other factors."

"Like the timing and platform factor," I added.

"Yes!" Operbia concluded: "So you see, your Beyoncé theory only applies to artistes from privileged backgrounds."

You should have seen the two of us; it was like the red team versus the blue team. Everything I said from this point gained heightened significance. I became more than just 'some guy' the birthday girl had invited to their expensive dinner.

A small thing really, but it struck me all the same: after we had eaten, Jeffrey, who had clearly been aiming to put me on the spot, asked to my surprise what I said my name was again.

"It's Johnny Green," I told him.

"Ah! Which kind name be that?" He said this ill-manneredly, and just like that, he looked away and engaged someone else in conversation. It was rude, but I made little of it.

When dinner was over, Operbia had a bone to pick with me. Apparently, she had noticed an unfriendly tension between myself and her best friend.

"Do you have a problem with Yvonne?" She asked me.

"I don't think she likes me," I told her, without failing to mention how I had pegged Jeffrey also for a kind of ass. Operbia seemed to agree with me on that one.

The others had left in a bunch, and soon after, Operbia told me she wanted to go out somewhere without having to end the night so plainly. It was her birthday after all, she said. The only spot I knew was Dereko's, a local pub I had visited some time ago around the Spintex roundabout. But Operbia objected. In the end we decided to go to the beach.

"It's such a beautiful night," she said. "Labadi by this time sounds like a plan."

It was a beautiful night alright. The Teshie-Nungua road to Labadi was well-lit and clear of traffic and police barriers. The wind was cool on my face as I turned a corner off the main road, taking a shortcut through back streets and obscure lanes. Operbia, who was now fed up with my Hip-Hop playlist, connected her phone to the cable and played a love tune.

We got out of my car at Labadi and walked several yards down the beach.

"Are you really thinking of swimming?" I was curious.

"Of course," she replied, already pulling her dress over her head. "I've been waiting to do this all week."

Operbia smiled invitingly at me. She was now wearing a red bikini, and seemed to be toying with the idea of removing it altogether. She threw her head back, hair floating down to her waist, and then she paddled her way into the water. Operbia looked like a goddess from my dreams; a wild animal with a fleshy figure; all hips and thighs and nipples.

"So you're just going to sit there and gawk?" She asked me.

For a moment, I considered joining her in the water, but a look at that dark ocean changed my mind. I took off my clothes and laid them on the ground to relax instead.

"I can't swim," I told her.

Operbia shrugged and continued floating in the gentle surf, letting herself be knocked around by the waves. Finally, she struggled back up to the beach and came lying next to me. I had already rolled up a joint.

"I've told you to stop smoking this filth," she said, pulling her hair into a low pony and sweeping the tail over her shoulder. "And Nikki told me you've been selling too. Is that true?"

"Me? Selling?" I chuckled.

"So you didn't sell Kush to my cousin the night we met?"

"Not at all. That was Bill," I lied.

Operbia chuckled and said: "I hear you."

After a long silence, she asked me how my meeting went with Mrs Barnes.

"It went well actually," I said, taking a hit from my joint. "I met this showbiz lady and took her number, possibly for a job."

"Aaaw, that's nice," Operbia unwrapped some chocolate from her handbag which she broke in half, offering me one. I took her hand instead, pulling her closer. The joint I was holding fell, and we were now kneeling face to face. Her body yielded to me at first; wherever my hands touched seemed to melt, except her breasts, which were ripe and firm. I leaned forward to kiss her. Our lips clung slowly, more sensual than before. When we moved our heads apart, she let out a deep sigh. Soon I was on top of her, but even as she was still holding me close, I started to get the vague feeling she was pushing me away at the same time. She stared blankly at me as I reached for the loose end of her bikini bottom. Then she began to wince and recoil. She turned away from me, covering her face with both hands. Then she began to cry. It was an ugly cry; an ugly, stomach-wrenching cry. I asked her what was wrong and she looked at me with vulnerable eyes. I could almost tell by instinct what had happened. I did not want to seem unmoved, and so slowly, I sat next to her so we could talk.

"What is it?" I asked.

Operbia had been a victim of rape. It happened at a house party she attended some time ago. She told me she was in denial at first, thinking it was all her fault; she didn't say "no" loud enough and she had a lot to drink that night. She gained consciousness the following morning when all she could remember was his fist down her throat to keep her from screaming. He had told her he loved her and she thought she loved him too.

"I haven't told anyone about this," Operbia said to me. I didn't know what to say. My shock quickly turned into anger at what the rapist had done to her.

"Who is he?" I asked, but she seemed unwilling to tell, and I decided against pursuing the matter.

I wanted to tell her everything was going to be okay, without sounding cliché. But there was an irony here; my compassion was not sincere. Deep down, I was actually disappointed we weren't having 'sex on the beach' that night. *So much for clichés*, I thought to myself. My expectation to be satisfied by a woman was desensitized, and it ran deep. I had been marred with the same sort of attitude that fosters a rape culture, the effects of which I was now facing up to, at the expense of my lover. And as this reality dawned on me, I realized that I was part of the problem, simply by being a man.



Jo-Anne Isobel Delaney King

Jo has been passionate about the art of storytelling for as long as she can remember, and has donated her skills as a layout designer and marketing professional to *JAY Lit* since its debut issue. Reading each author's work while she carefully crafts each digital issue has turned her into an avid supporter and advocate for African youth literature. Her day job requires a focus on business writing, so Jo often finds herself rebelling in the in-between spaces and quiet nocturnal hours with emotive poetry and surrealist tales such as *Boy*.

[Follow @joisobel on Instagram](#)



Boy

Boy has trouble sleeping.

During the day, he spends his time in the garden and at the park, saving small creatures from harm.

At night, when his grandmother tells him, "Boy, go to bed," he sits at his desk and thinks and draws his plans for the next day's mission of salvation.

How can Boy sleep when there is so much to think about?

One night, Boy's grandmother gave him a special glass of milk.

Quite soon after Boy had gulped down the warm drink, he felt drowsy and slowly, slowly, his head dropped down onto his chest.

It was not a feeling Boy was used to, so he lay down on his bed and waited for it to pass.

But it didn't.



The light was very pale and pretty and Boy could not decide what colour it was.

It began to move away from him, and slowly expand, and a whole picture appeared before Boy. A rolling hill in the distance, a meadow, a huge tree, and a girl on a swing.

Boy walked into the meadow, trying not to make a sound in case he scared the girl away. She hadn't seen him yet. He thought he could hear her singing, but Boy suddenly wasn't sure of his thoughts.

Boy sat on the grass and dug his fingers into the soil. It felt like the soil at home did, and at the same time it didn't. The soil was like velvet in his hands. Boy suddenly realised that he was not at home.

"Who are you?"

Boy jerked away from thoughts of his whereabouts and looked up at the girl from the swing.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Boy shouted. "You were on the swing and now you are right in front of me."

Girl pulled a funny face and laughed.

Boy liked the sound, so he laughed too.

"I can't move," she said. "You moved me."

Boy dropped the soil in his hands, dusting them on his trousers as he stood up. He was not an ill-mannered boy, and he suddenly felt rude.

"I'm Boy," he said, offering his hand.

She looked at his hand, and took a step backwards. "If you touch me, I will disappear."

Jo-Anne Isobel Delaney King

Boy suddenly realised that the only thing he really wanted to do in the whole world, was touch Girl. He sat down again, feeling miserable and lost. He needed his desk, where he could think and plan and somehow find a way to make it okay to touch Girl.

"Stop that," said Girl. "If you think too much, you will go back and then you will never see me again. Isn't seeing me better than not seeing me, even if you can never touch me?"

"Yes," replied Boy.

"Let's go for a walk."

Boy followed Girl back in the direction of the swing. She didn't really walk so much as move ahead at the speed he was moving at. If he stopped, she stopped. It was as if he was propelling her forward. And yet, she was leading him.

"Weird..." grumbled Boy.

Girl laughed, and then they were running. They ran and ran, down a hill that smelt of lemongrass and lilac. Boy was happy, running free down the hill with Girl in front of him. He liked the way her skirt lifted up and down in the breeze. He thought the back of her knees rather attractive.

Girl laughed at him all the way. Boy felt the colours around him change as they ran deeper into the valley below. Girl stopped and so did he.

"Were we on a hill back there?"

Girl nodded and, placing a finger over her lips, whispered, "Shhhh."

She then pointed to the most dark-blue body of water Boy had ever seen. It was so dark and so blue it made his soul ache. The more he looked at the water, the deeper he thought it must be. Boy could not have known how long he stood staring at the water, but it was a very long time indeed. By the time Boy looked away from the water and deepest, darkest blue he'd ever seen, Girl had vanished.

Boy ran away from the water, back in the direction they'd come from. He ran back up the hill. Girl was nowhere to be found. Sitting himself down on the swing where he'd first seen her, Boy started to cry. He hadn't felt so helpless in a long time. He wanted to find Girl and bring her back.

Most of all, he wanted to touch Girl.

The huge tree next to the swing rustled. Boy jumped out of the swing and fell backwards onto the grass. Everyone knows what a scary thing a moving tree can be. A very tall, very skinny man climbed down and out of the tree. His face looked very old, and very much like it had been carved out of bark.

"She's still here," he said to Boy. His voice sounded like sandpaper. Boy shivered.

"Where?" he asked.

"Behind you. Back from where you came from."

"But that's not here!" shouted Boy.

"What is here, or there?" said the tree man. "You can only see what you want to see here, but there you can feel all that you want to feel."

"I have to go back, you mean."

"You don't have to."

Boy sighed. He did not like the tree man, he just wanted to find Girl again. He climbed back onto the swing and decided to sit and think a while. The tree man pushed him on the swing. Later, he climbed back up into the huge tree. Boy began to think of the sky and wondered why there wasn't one.

And there was one. It was pink and orange and reminded him of a dress his grandmother wore sometimes on Sundays. Boy wondered why there weren't any birds in the sky. He quite liked birds. At least they filled the world with sound. He thought about Girl's laugh and was sad again.

A bird appeared in front of the swing. It had blue eyes and white feathers. Boy thought it was an albino bird of some sort.

"Hello, do you know where Girl is?"

The bird laughed. It was Girl's laugh.

Quick as a flash, Boy reached out and grabbed the bird!

Everything turned to powder.



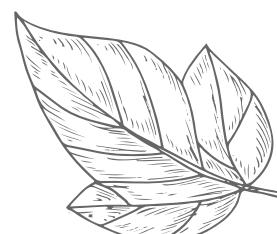
Boy opened his eyes. The morning sunlight was streaming in dusty beams across his bed. He didn't want to go into his garden that day. Or the day after that. All he did was sit at his desk and draw pictures of the world that turned to powder. All day and night. He never drew Girl.

Some weeks later, Boy's grandmother told him to come out of his room and go outside. Outside, Boy kicked the soil around with his shoe. He hated the way it broke apart so easily. He looked at the bushes from which he'd rescued all manner of worm and snail and rodent and felt repulsed. He wandered to the furthest corner of his garden, where a collection of large rocks was located. He climbed onto the highest rock and looked into the neighbour's garden, hoping to see a space much worse than his own. The garden was disappointingly lush.

And Girl was in the garden. A statue in the middle of a cobblestone maze, surrounded by adoring vines. Boy jumped over the wall as fast as he could to get to Girl. He wrapped his arms around her tight and crushed his warm body against her cold stone flesh.

"Girl!" he wept.

A single tear formed in the corner of Girl's eye. It was the deepest, darkest blue Boy had ever seen. Except it wasn't. He licked the tear from her cheek...



Boy and Girl
Together for eternity
Locked embrace
Stone and chaste
Lost in the deep, dark blue

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PLAYS





Julie Graham

Julie Graham is a writer, editor and theatre lover based in Cape Town, South Africa. She finds solace in the transformative, healing words of poetry and prose, and uses writing as a way to express the trials and tribulations of the human experience. She has a BA (Hons) degree in creative writing, journalism and drama from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

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Girl

Synopsis

This short play is a solo performance by a single actress who performs in four different roles. The themes are overcoming heartbreak, depression, questioning the meaning of life, self-destructive behaviour, and the renewal of hope.

Characters

NARRATOR

The main character, a female speaker who changes between an older and younger woman's voice.

VLAD and TARRAGON

Two male characters played by the same actress as the NARRATOR, each with different voices.

Scene 1

NARRATOR: [*In a younger woman's voice:*]

"Sister? You need to eat now."
"Sister? You can't just stand there."
"Sister? Do you hear me?"
"Sister? Please..."

[*Older woman's voice:*]

The girl's eyes did not shift from the window.
Her fixed, sullen stare was perplexing.
Mystifying.
At the same time, however, the steadfast intensity of her gaze.
Held no life in it whatsoever.
It was as if her eyes,
Once impenetrable,
Had been polished matt
And left to dry...
Lustreless.

Life had been a series of constructs.
Abstraction to the point of...
Disillusionment/disenchantment/dissatisfaction/discontent...
Disappointment.
This did not fit into the girl's childhood dreams and fantasies
Of gratification
And the promise of love.
No, not at all.
It was a dream gone astray,
Trespassing into the vile pit of nightmares
And getting prosecuted.
Put on trial for being...

Julie Graham

VLAD: [Uses a man's voice and changes position to his stance:]
"Absolutely absurd."

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]
And yet... the girl refused to believe that her dreams could not be rescued...
She stood by the window, day after day,
Lynching on tightly to her image of the prince.

TARRAGON: "He should be here."
VLAD: "He didn't say for sure he'd come."
TARRAGON: "And if he doesn't come?"
VLAD: "We'll come back tomorrow."
TARRAGON: "And then the day after tomorrow."
VLAD: "Possibly."
TARRAGON: "And so on."
VLAD: "The point is—"
TARRAGON: "Until he comes. Until he comes..."

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]
The existential playfulness of the dialogue was comforting.
She tried to believe that he would indeed come.
And she would wait.
For the prince, the castle.
And of course,
The promise of love.
But reality was never far from her thoughts...
Invasive and persistent,
It reminded her that, like Vlad and Tarragon, she might be waiting for the rest of
her life.

Existing merely for the sake of existence.

No real purpose or rationale.

The girl tried to disconnect her thoughts from this gloomy idea of reality.
She would not be satisfied with anything other than what she desired.
She saw too many people living their lives.
Breathing in
Breathing out...
vacant.
pleased with their "accomplishments" of

TARRAGON: "Marriage
mahogany furniture
monthly paychecks
maternal bliss...
To society, they were successful.
To her, they were just statistics."

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]

In the meantime,
she had decided to live her life in the only way she knew how.
The only way she thought fit for survival.
And survival was everything.
Headstrong and hedonistic.
If the opportunity of passion or pleasure arose,
the girl would abandon all responsibility.
She settled on attempting to have a fiery and frivolous love affair with the world
around her.
No matter how destructive this might be to both herself,
And those she encountered on her expedition.
However,
Rarely deceived in other walks of life,
The girl was amazed at her capacity to be deceived in love.

Scene 2

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]

She sat by the river and silently wept.
All the innocence between them was lost.
Savagely ripped from them
like the night rips the light from the day.
Could things ever be the same again?
Was it possible to forget the lies, the deception and the trickery?
It was like a twisted game,
an eye-for-an-eye that had exploded into
full-blown
warfare.

There was always a calm that lingered in the air,
thick with the inevitable instance of war that would ensue.

[Moves across the stage with these lines:]

She tried.
Over
And over
And over again.

The girl relished the moments of warmth and safety that they found on very
rare occasions in their pursuit of happiness.

Would they ever find happiness and hold on to it long enough for all the pain to
be worth it?

Or was it all too late.
Such desperate questions that robbed them both of the joy of love.
And life.

Julie Graham

VLAD: "Damaged goods!"

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]

The girl considered the words and the possibility that she may be too damaged and broken to ever truly find what she was looking for.

She attempted to banish these poisonous, tremulous thoughts from her mind, but they always crept in during moments of darkness.

Moments just like this one.

Again she felt lost in the existential playground, waiting and waiting for something that, in all likeliness, would never come to her.

NARRATOR: [Younger woman's voice:]

"Sister? It's time to come inside."

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]

There was nothing, no one there.

Only the stench of her own betrayal, amplified by that of another.

She resisted the urge to get up and run and tried, instead, to remember the strength she once had.

She uttered the word...

Strength.

The words came out like a moan, and she immediately wondered whether it was even a real characteristic of herself or whether she had merely made it all up.

A pseudo-characteristic that she had 'awarded' herself in moments of courage.

This was not the picture of someone who possessed strength.

VLAD: "She was deceived once again."

Scene 3

NARRATOR: [Older woman's voice:]

She was approaching the end of her journey and could see the swirls of hope for a better future.

She tried to paddle faster, but her oars were rotting, full of holes and the current was pushing her in the opposite direction.

She thought about jumping into the dangerous water, but her ability to keep herself afloat was... questionable.

What were her other options?

She closed her eyes and prayed, but there was still nobody listening.

Would it be easier to just give up the fight once and for all and simply allow the current to take her back?

Maybe. But the girl was a fighter and DID NOT GIVE UP.

She continued pushing, paddling... praying...

[Moves across the stage with these lines:]

TARRAGON: "Praying to the
Devil
and the
deep blue sea."

THE JOURNAL OF
AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE



TRANSLATIONS





Lanre Lagada-Abayomi

Lanre Lagada-Abayomi is the Head of the Yoruba Service at the Voice of Nigeria (VON), a professional translator certified by the Nigeria Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), and a Development Communication researcher. Lanre is a prolific writer and has authored several books, short novels, and anthologies in Yoruba. He has a Masters in Yoruba language and literature and in Mass Communication. Lanre received the International Distinguished Researcher Award in 2020 from RULA International in India and the Best Local Language Reporting (Broadcast) on HIV/AIDS Red Ribbon Award in 2010. He also received two awards in 2000 from the Department of Nigerian Languages and Literature at Ogun State University (now Olabisi Onabanjo University) for Best Graduating Student and Best Student in Yoruba Creative Writing.

We are proud to present two original poems by Lanre in Yoruba, with English translations by the author.

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Obìnrin (Adúláwò)

Obìnrin ni mî
 Ọkín, olórí eyé
 Egbin ni mí, Àkàndá Elédùwà
 Bùbá, ìró, gèlè, ìpèlé
 Ni mo fi jẹ abo aláwò dídú mìnìjòjò.
 Șùkú, pàtewó, ipákó-élédè, kòlésè,
 Ló mú mi rẹwà lábo adúláwò
 Èṣó ɔrùn, yetí, tímò, làálì, àtíkè
 Ni mo fi járewà lobìnrin
 Obìnrin ni mî
 Àkàndá Olódùmarè
 Egbèje lòrò tí ní bẹníkùn mi
 Tákọ tabo wa ó fi șèwà wù
 Tílè yíí ó fi rójú
 Egbèlégbè nímò tí mo mò
 Tákọ nàgà tí ò rí
 Obìnrin ni mî
 Kí í șatèyìntò șáá
 Mo lògbón, nímò, lóye ɔrò

A Lady (An African Lady)

Am a lady
 Peacock, the king of flocks
 Zebra, the beautiful creature
 The elegant top, wrapper, headgear, piece
 Identify me as a gorgeous African lady
 Beautifully designed weavings on my head
 Enhance my black beauty
 The decorated jewelry, black ore, spicy powder
 Magnify my ebony beauty
 Am a lady
 Special creature of God
 Countless wisdoms am endowed with
 That could be collectively employed for betterment
 Uncountable are my knowledges
 That men are yet to explore
 Am a lady
 Not a senseless creature
 But endowed with wisdom, knowledge, understanding

Ìrìn Àrè

Ajá gbó gbó gbó, wọn ò gbó nílé!
 Ọjó lojó ti wón dé lómijé roro
 Tàkísà lórùn lonírìn-àrè
 Fi n dúpé ewu gbogbo tó ré kojá wọn

Akánjú-jayé, wọn ì jayé pé
 'Morocco' lòmîti gbà dèní arè lọ
 'Spain' lòmîti dèní èwòn sírìn àjò
 'Italy' ni wón ti bayé ọmoge mî jẹ dòní

Șébí wón kílò tití, pé àforítì nilé-ayé
 O kágídí borí bí fáànù Íbò
 O lóo fẹ gégi ọlà wéré wéré
 O pa tèkó tì, o fẹ lọ síbi owó n so

Iró n paró fúnro yín kiri
 Pesé ọjó kan, egbègbérún dólà ni
 Oníbíí-níran dèní arè, tí ná sá kiri
 Bóó dúró gbékó gidi, oriire n bẹ nílé

The Undue Migration

The lost dog could be hardly heard at home
 Their state of arrival was full of tears
 While the deported migrants
 Casting their experiences in dashed hopes

Undue haste heads in destruction
 Many lives lost, voyaging through Morocco
 Many became prisoners at Spain
 Many ladies lost their dignity in Italy

You're forewarned that endurance breeds prosperity
 But heeded not
 Seeking for a quick root to the wealth
 You abandoned the education for greener pasture

Playing into deceits
 That dollars flying in thousand on daily job
 The reputable cast themselves in mud
 Patience rewards good deeds at home

THE JOURNAL OF
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ESSAYS





Charles Prempeh

Charles Prempeh obtained his BA and MPhil. degree in African Studies from the University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana, respectively. He successfully defended his doctoral thesis on Pentecostalism and chieftaincy at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, UK in February 2021. His research interests include chieftaincy, religions, gender, and youth popular cultures.

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Philosophies of romantic love and rumours of conjugal relations at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana 2004-2009: A poststructural analysis of student popular culture

Abstract

Using the theory of poststructuralism, my paper analyses how students at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana deploy new words and expressions to fashion philosophies of love that challenge normative positions of society on the subject. I argue that students use these words and terms to say things and envision ideas that would be impossible depending on “normative” language alone. I look at how these coinages, forming youth culture, determine inter-student relations, reflect ideas of gender and social status, and how students subvert society’s control in a community that valorises all forms of sexual discourses. Given the fact that matters of love are embedded in secrecy in a society where open discussion of love is frowned upon, I depend on rumours and my position as a former student of the UCC to discuss the subject within the period of 2004-2009. The paper contributes to youth popular culture that embodies how the youth in a Ghanaian university are engaging in conventional sex discourses.

Introduction

In 2019, I read Coker’s interesting article that featured aspects of student popular culture around sex at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana. Given that I had studied at the UCC and belonged to the only male-hall of the university, I decided to reflect on a similar subject, covering the period when I was at the university both as a student and teaching assistant (2004-2009). Sex ethics is a feature of many cultures and form part of the social control mechanisms in society (Awedoba, 2002: 145, 1997: 159; al-Qaradawi 2016: 146). In some African cultures, while the idea of incest is a social construct, sexual intercourse is forbidden between certain classes of people. For example, when sexual intercourse between two relatives constitutes incest, such persons *ipso facto* cannot marry each other (Nukunya, 2016: 55). Among the Ashanti in Ghana, sexual intercourse with a clan sister or brother is frowned upon, although no tangible kinship connection can be demonstrated between those concerned due to the sheer size of the Ashanti clan or the *abusua* in its broadest sense (Awedoba, 2002: 120). Certainly, societies everywhere have cultural rules that seek to control sexual relations (Haviland, 1999: 232). Sex taboos are not always connected to genital contact. There is non-sexual intercourse. Among the Mende people of Sierra Leone, opposite-sex siblings could not sleep or sit on each other’s beds without committing incest. A person should also not approach the parents of his or her spouse after intercourse without having first washed. To do so would amount to committing incest (Awedoba, 2002: 119-120). The ubiquity of discussions on sex in contemporary Ghana has not radically changed the liberality that was expected to accompany people’s perception of sex.

Charles Prempeh

Most Africans, particularly the older generation, continue to exercise tight-lip on the subject. Among the Akan, for example, a wife cannot discuss her sex relations in public (Sarpong, 1974: 74). For example, among the Ewe, a woman should not hit her husband with her red-napkins (pants used as a sanitary pad); otherwise, he will lose his manly sanctity and virility. If a wife refuses to clean her husband's penis after sexual intercourse, the husband's manly sanctity is defiled. If a husband wants to have sex with an unwilling wife and she pushes him down to the bed, the manly sanctity of the husband is defiled. A man should not have sex with a woman during her menstrual period. If he does so, then he has defiled his own sanctity. It is taboo for a husband to stretch his hand over a baby lying between him and his wife to make love to his wife. In other words, husbands should not have sex with their nursing wives. If a husband does so, it is believed that the baby will die, and he defiled himself (Dzobo, 1986: 48-52).

Among the Nzema, conjugal morality delineates the acceptable set of moral codes or regulatory mechanisms that govern sexual activity and the marriage institution. Their understanding of sexual immorality may be extended to cover dreams of sexual intercourse with a married woman or man. Thus, having a dream of sexual intercourse with a married woman or man is taken as a sexual reality. For a man to give gifts to a married woman without the prior knowledge of her husband can be equated to seduction. It is even worse still to shave the hair in the armpit of a married woman (Frimpong-Nnuroh, 2002: 28).

In African scholarship, scholars in anthropology and sociology are beginning to take a keen interest in discussing sex and lovemaking discourse (Thomas & Cole, 2009: 2). For a very long time, literary scholars have mainly written about love, romance, and sex in fiction. Theatre performances have also espoused society's views about sex and romance. The absence of extensive literature on the subject also feeds into the epistemological discourses the colonists constructed about African sexuality. During the period of the African slave trade, European representations of African "barbary" depicted African men and women as libidinous and licentious (Jordan, 1968; Morgan, 2004). This European depiction of Africans was a worldwide phenomenon of how they perceived the so-called racial *other* elsewhere in the colonies around the world. Similarly, during the colonial era, colonial government officials censored films that offered varying visions of intimacy and romantic and sexually explicit themes. This was because it was feared that it would incite licentious behaviours and give black men the wrong impression of white women (Gutsche, 1972; Burns, 2002). Focusing on the physiology of Sara Bartmann, a Hottentot woman who left South Africa in 1810, the Europeans stereotyped African women as having an unbridled sexual appetite. Bartmann was also transformed into a spectacle, which constructed black female sexuality as pathologised, deviant, and degraded (Ponzanesi, 2005: 170). The continent of Africa itself was also feminised, viewed as a woman to be exploited (raped) at will (Wilke, 2006; Corbey, 1988). The feminisation and the inferiorisation of Africa were part of the imaginative order and attempts by Europeans to project their spurious and alleged superiority to Africans (Said, 1978). Portrayed as a female entity, the continent was tamed, enlightened, guided, opened, and pierced by white, European males through Western science, Christianity, civilisation, commerce, and colonisation (Jarosz, 1992: 108). This was part of the taming of the continent, which forced Africans to derive their validity from this, and took wealth from the colonised system through cognitive subjugation of the colonised *Other* (Fanon, 1963: 2). The visual representation of colonised people as savages not only helped sustain imperialist expansion but also supplied Europeans with a new, empowering framework for identity based on racial and cultural essentialism (Maxwell, 1999: 4).

The positioning of Africans and Africa in totalising anthropological sexual discourses partly contributed to the reasons the subject of sex was hardly studied among African anthropologists, not isolating the connections drawn between anthropology and colonialism (Asad, 1973: 17). Consequently, for many of the African nationalists, like Kwame Nkrumah, anthropology was considered an alibi of colonialism (Ntarangwi, Babiker & Mill, 2006: 15) and could not be incorporated into the modern university in Ghana. At the time of independence, most of these leaders had misgivings about teaching anthropology. Similarly, the idea that anthropology focused on ‘exotic’ and ‘primitive’ societies undermined its relevance to African academics in the early days of political independence (Wallerstein, 1983: 155). Thus, given the stifling of anthropology as a discipline in some modern universities in Africa, most scholars did not venture into discussing the subject of sex and romance, which would have fitted well in the discipline.

Research approach and theoretical background

I deploy my positionality as a former student and teaching assistant at the UCC to engage the discussion. I am also a Casfordian, belonging to the only all-male hall (Casely-Hayford Hall) at the UCC. I also frequented the Atlantic Hall (ATL, whose hallers or residents are known as Mariners) and observed PAWA Night [1] on some occasions. I use rumour as a methodological category because, while some of the issues shared in the paper are believed to be “real and true”, they are diffused through rumour and gossip.

Rumour is defined as unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that help people make sense and manage risk (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007: 13). Even so, rumour has some characteristics that make it suitable as a methodological framework for my research. These include the fact that they are public and universally shared within a social context; their initiation may be underpinned by some element of “truth”, no matter how obscure or circumstantial the evidence; and they convey a motive that “Our minds strive to eliminate chaos and uncertainty” (Michelson & Mouly, 2000: 340). “When the truth is not directly forthcoming we piece together information as best we can, giving rise to rumors, rationalization, and the search for a definition of the situation” (*ibid*). The reason rumours circulate is that they explain things and relieve the tension of uncertainty (Rosnow & Fine, 1976: 51). More importantly, I deploy rumours since, on the campus of the UCC, they perform the social functions of entertainment, communication of group norms, and defining social network, power structures and boundaries (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007: 23).

Methodologically, therefore, I maintain that there is no smoke (rumour) without fire (some form of “truth”). This is also to say that the secrecy built around sex has an expression even in the university elitist environment (Foucault, 1978). But the clouding of romantic love in secrecy at the UCC was also because it contravenes social norms and the expected behaviour of students, who are expected to be ‘enlightened’. The periodisation of the subject mirrors the fact that knowledge and practices of sex, like the architecture of culture, are osmotic and could have geographical similarities and differences with other universities in Ghana and Africa.

Charles Premeh

In this paper, I deploy poststructuralism theory to engage my discussion. As expressed by Belsey (2002: 5), poststructuralism is an analytical tool that is concerned with the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings. Poststructuralism assumes that words do not carry neutral meanings, but they are deeply connected with desire and power. I find this theory relevant because it provides an opportunity for the interrogation of normative sex ethics that are passed on from generation to generation, sometimes through folklore and religious texts. It also helps us to appreciate how students, as part of their popular culture, see sex ethics as social constructs that may not necessarily cohere with their subjectivities as young adults. The importance of poststructuralism for this paper is that “it offers critiques and methods for examining functions and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that we put into place” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000: 6). Poststructuralism helps us analyse and question certain practices and perspectives that are masked as normative (Kumashiro, 2004: xxiii). More specifically, it helps to demonstrate how language is vested with power and how it works to produce subjectivity. Poststructuralism also shows how words occur within particular cultural narratives and shape our understanding of ourselves, others, and the possible (Barrett, 2005: 81).

Given all this, I examined how students invert words and terms away from their traditional meanings to rationalise their improvised sex ethics. Consequently, by contesting normativity, I explore how students deploy their agency in a university environment, away from the prying eyes of their parents, to engage in discourse on sex and romance. I will also demonstrate how concepts of sex reflect gender relations and male-centrism among students and some cultures in Ghana.

Three ambitions of the UCC student

In this section, I look at how the new social status students achieve as university students shapes their ambitions, particularly romantic love relations, in the university. The UCC was established in 1962 in the Central Region of Ghana to train teachers for senior high schools. Thus, since its establishment, the university continues to attract mature students, some of whom have already had a training college education and whose philosophies of love are different from other universities, like the University of Ghana (which attracts many young students out of senior high schools). But at the UCC during the period under consideration, there were essentially three student aspirations that must work hard to achieve. Ideally, all the ambitions should be achieved, although this was often not possible, or at least one or two of them.

These three ambitions were travelling abroad, getting a First Class, and establishing a conjugal relation. While most students who went to the UCC sought to excel academically, not all of them aspired to get a First Class. At the UCC, First Class was considered a degree for anti-social students (“anti-so”). There were myths built around this aspiration. It was believed that those who achieved the First Class died prematurely and that they struggled to find a job. Given all these myths about a First Class, the basic understanding was that one should aspire to get a Second Class (preferably Upper). At the Casely Hayford Hall (the only male hall where I belonged as a proud member), Second Class Upper was considered a gentleman’s class. This was not to say that Casfordians did not aspire to get a First Class. It was simply to express the fact that life was not all about getting a First Class.

There was also the ambition to travel. It was generally believed that it was easy to secure a student visa to travel to any country in Western Europe or North America. The basic understanding was that a student was likely to return to their country of birth to continue their education. During the period under consideration, students who travelled to the Global North provided cheap labour and were known as "burgers", from Hamburg in Germany. While travelling was open to all the sexes, most of those who travelled were males. Even so, like getting a First Class, travelling was still not within the reach of most students. It was usually the preserve of a few students from financially well-to-do families. Given that the UCC had many trained teachers who had come to the school on the heels of study-leave-with-pay, many of whom were also parents, these individuals concentrated on their studies. Those who had just joined the UCC from secondary school were also inexperienced, usually from lower-income homes, and consequently lacked the financial means to travel. Thus very few students at the UCC travelled to secure the coveted title of "burger". "Burger" conveyed respect to students with the title.

The third ambition, which was almost accessible to all, was establishing a conjugal relation. The most common expression for this was "grabbing". While most students went to the UCC to pursue a degree in a chosen discipline, many of them had the secondary motive of "grabbing". "Grabbing" was an important aspect of UCC life for many reasons. At the secondary school level, a pupil's life is closely scrutinised. A pupil is almost barred from establishing any form of conjugal relation. Thus, while some dare to "grab" in spite of the consequences in secondary schools, it is still not considered a normative practice. Usually, such pupils are targeted for stigmatisation, suspension or expulsion (if they are in the boarding house), or public embarrassment. These prohibitions against establishing conjugal relations were relaxed at the UCC. At the secondary school level, most pupils, particularly female pupils, are careful not to engage in any form of romantic relations that could jeopardise their chances of continuing their education. In many Ghanaian low-income homes, a female pupil who becomes pregnant at the secondary school level is likely going to end her education. Consequently, at the secondary school level, female pupils receive counsel against even playing around boys, and boys are caricatured as sex predators to be feared and avoided. But again, at the UCC, these perceptions gave way to free-reign sex relations. Female students dared to free mix with males. They could even dare to be pregnant without much concern for the negative consequences. At least, in the event of a pregnancy, the worst they would suffer was deferring their programme for a semester or year. At the university level, one was just a step away from the world of full adulthood with all the responsibilities attached and the world of work. Many students at the UCC took care of themselves financially. Many of them had already worked or had transitioned from young adult to full adulthood. They were, therefore, able to make their own decisions without necessarily consulting their parents. At the university level, many had crossed the thresholds their parents had reached in the area of academics. At the UCC during the period under consideration, many students were better informed about sex than their parents. The university also provided a broader social network for students to interact freely and exchange ideas about love, romance, and sex. Even religious groups organised programmes on conjugal relations for student-devotees. Virtually every student aspired to "grabbing". In fact, "grabbing" had less to do with one's financial status or physical qualities. At the UCC, one could fully understand the assertion that "Everyone has his or her lover."

Charles Prempeh

“Grabbing”, unlike travelling and getting a First Class, was open to all. There were times a male student may not have had to verbalise his love for a female student. Ongoing group discussion, displaying wit, and engaging in group assignments generally helped. Sometimes, the ability of a male student to “fool” (entertain students) at the highest degree was enough to secure him a conjugal girlfriend.

“Romantic” love between Casfordians and the royals of Adehye

In this section, I discuss the relations among university halls and how they shaped conjugal relations and sex life among students. Students in single-sex halls had some advantages. For example, the female hall alliance of Casford is Adehye Hall (an all-female hall). Students from both halls attended the same programmes. During hall week celebrations, Casfordians invited Adehye hallers (also known as Royals) and vice versa. During such programmes, certain appellations were used which were suggestive of love, romance, and sex. For example, Casfordians always addressed Adehye hallers as “our wives”, while Adehye hallers addressed Casfordians as “our husbands”. While this may cause eyebrows to be raised at the secondary school level (where such alliances obtain), at the UCC, such labels were a social means to reading the heart of a potential spouse. They were also vested with social implications of conviviality that enhance conjugal relations between the two halls.

There were strict rules around the Adehye. Male students were not allowed to be in the hall beyond 10 pm. Some Casfordians had a way of establishing permanent residence at Adehye hall. In most cases, the women provided comfortable rooms for some Casfordians who had actualised the “our wives” metaphor. The opposite was also true at Casford. Some Adehye hallers spent many nights at Casford with their “husbands”. In such cases, roommates would have to look for a place to sleep. The process of roommates giving way in this case was known as “narrowing”. It was almost a norm that all Casfordians suffered “narrowing” or were “narrowed” at some point before graduating. However, no one got angry if they were “narrowed”. It was considered a normal practice at the hall.

Let us “understand” ourselves

In this section, I discuss how two married individuals who left their spouses at home formed conjugal alliances on the campus. I argue that through this practice, coined as “understanding”, students subvert traditional norms about marital fidelity. “Understanding”, as a conjugal practice, is one of the ways students at the UCC contested conventions on adultery. “Understanding” was a practice where two married couples, who had left their respective spouses at home, decided to form temporary conjugal alliances. The philosophy behind “understanding” was that sex is a biological need that must be fulfilled. It was also believed that once one had had an active sex life in marriage, one could not live without sex, not even for a week.

However, “understanding” thrived in secrecy, and one must guard against pregnancy. The invention of condoms since the seventeenth century is believed to have contributed to illicit, extramarital affairs (Noonan, Jr, 1986: 348). It is believed that condoms, which have improved in quality since then, helped in making the practice of “understanding” safe. The practice of “understanding” subverted the idea of adultery, which is considered a punishable offence in many Ghanaian cultures.

In many cases, the word adultery connoted the idea that it was a sin committed by women, not men. For example, the Akan word for adultery, “*edwaman*”, has a symbolic and imaginative representation of a woman, not a man. *Edwaman* (a contraction of “*wa dwa oman ne mu*” – she has broken the unity of the state or society) was about a woman who committed adultery. The philosophical and ethical foundation of this was that the woman built the family, and so a woman who committed adultery split the unity of the family – and by extension the society – since the family is the basic unit of society. A man had the right to marry multiple women, however. A man was, therefore, hardly charged with committing adultery since the assumption was that he could marry many women at will. This was not the same for women, who were proscribed from marrying multiple men. Conversely, among the Lele of Congo that Douglas (1977: 128) reported polyandry, where a woman could marry more than one male member of a particular age-set. Such a woman was not expected to be biased in offering sexual service to the age-set members. The practice was to relax the rigours of marital codes (*ibid*). Generally, polyandry is rare in Africa. The use of the word *edwaman* is an example of one of the ways language is used to inscribe subordination of the female body and to confer authority of the male over the female.

Nonetheless, a man who subverted the rules against adultery and engages in sexual relations with another man’s wife was fined (“*Ayerefa sika*”). Jean Allman (1997) wrote that when a man’s wife had a sexual connection with another man, the husband was entitled to a small compensation. The case was considered a domestic matter (“*efiesem*”). To have a connection with the wife of an officeholder, however, was a crime against the state (“*oman akyiwade*”), and compensation was awarded based upon the rank of the man whose sexual rights to his wife had been violated. Compensation could range from a substantial quantity of gold to capital punishment for the offender, the wife, and even members of her family (Allman, 1997: 304-305; Rattray, 1929). Among the Nzema, a man secured the marital fidelity of his wife by placing a chastity spell on her (Frimpong-Nnuroh, 2002: 28). Any man and/or a woman on whom the spell has been placed who violated the spell could fall sick or even die. Among the Logadaa of West Africa, if a man provides food to his jural wife who has given birth following a sexual congress with another man, the jural husband would die. The lover of his wife would have to offer adultery payment (“*paa bume*”, meaning “things of the vagina”) before the jural husband have sex with his wife. Also, if two men who have slept with the same woman accidentally touch each other’s hands when eating from the same bowl, they exposed themselves to supernatural sanction (Goody, 1962: 105).

In the southern Eweland of Ghana, a husband desiring to punish his adulterous wives did so by placing a chastity hex on her and the lover in secret without revealing that this has been done. The chastity hex compelled a confession of infidelity from the adulterous wife or ritual purification before she could re-enter her husband’s home (Abotchie, 1997: 82-83).

Fictive family and *nkoso* conjugal alliances

In this section, I discuss how students circumvent the norms about the “traditional” marriage process through a relationship with a non- or semi-literate “village” girl. The term “*nkoso*” was coined to refer to such girls and the creative invention of fictive families. Aside from “understanding”, there was the idea of sexually preying on *nkoso*. The UCC shares close boundaries with the communities (villages) of Apewosika, Kokoado, Kwapro, and Amamoma.

Charles Prempeh

During the period under consideration, no walls were built to separate the UCC from these villages. Students and non-students crisscrossed each other's boundaries freely. One of the spill-over effects of such free movement was the practice related to the term *nkoso*. It was believed that these *nkoso* were attracted to UCC male students, and they were proud to have a conjugal alliance with them. For a "village" girl to flirt with a university student was considered a rise in social status for the lady. Traditional political actors in the villages had constantly staged protests against UCC male students impregnating the girls. The complaint was legitimate because many of the male UCC students impregnated the *nkoso* and left her after they completed their education.

Given that the traditional political actors could not stop some UCC male students from having sex with these girls, the chiefs decided to devise a way of sanitising such relations. One way of doing this was through imprecation, which involved the invocation of curses on students who sexually abused the village girls. But the failure of imprecation to stop students from having sexual affairs with the *nkoso* led to an attempt at formalising such relations. The chiefs and elders revitalised the "tradition" of asking potential son-in-laws to meet with their families. This was in tandem with the indigenous practice of establishing marriage as a confluence of families, not individuals (Agyekum, 2012). The chiefs wanted to establish a family alliance – real or putative – with male students on campus and legitimise the student's claim of sexual access to their daughters, since that is one of the functions of marriage (Haviland, 1999: 233). Consequently, a common expression of the people in the village when a student approached them for a wife was, "Take us to your family".

Over the years, male UCC students devised many ways to subvert attempts at discouraging "illegitimate" sexual alliances with the *nkoso*. One such scheme was for students to create fictive families. Because UCC had many trained teachers who had taught in villages other than their own, they formed fictive families there. When they came to the UCC, they deployed such fictive families to lure families of the *nkoso* into accepting to establish marriage relations with them. With that conviction, they were allowed to "marry" the *nkoso*, and some had children together in the course of their "marriage". After most of these students completed their schooling, they left without taking responsibility for the natal families they had created in the villages. Because of this scheme, the surrounding villages had many fatherless children. University lecturers and authorities always asked students to treat such children well since they were the children of UCC students.

The practice of *nkoso* was so common and institutionalised that the student 'kingpin' of the practice was called "*nkosohene*". Usually, the *nkosohene* was both celebrated and rejected. Female UCC students had no respect for *nkosohene* and those like him because they were considered opportunists and cheap. Others hailed them as socialists with no respect for social class or social stratification in their quest to satisfy their sexual urges. The idea of *nkoso* thrived on the philosophy that "Even dirty water can quench a fire". Here, the "dirty water" is a metaphor for the *nkoso*, while the "fire" is the unbridled male sexual desire or sex mania. In the philosophy of these students, any mature woman, regardless of social class, including educational attainment, should suffice to satisfy the sexual needs of a man. This also relates to the understanding that "Below the belt, there is no discipline." Unfortunately, this type of thinking has shaped rape discourses in Ghana and many countries where in most cases, the person raped was accused of wearing skimpy clothing and provoking the sexual urges of a man (Boakye, 2012).

“September rush” and “widows” at the UCC

“September rush” and “widows” are ways that students creatively deploy concepts to engage with the daily existential realities of love and sex. I argue that through this creativity around conjugal relations, students redeployed Akan indigenous customs to negotiate romantic relations. The other forms of conjugal relations are the “widows” and “help-me-finish-my-degree” alliances. “Widows” entered the UCC under the influence of anti-male counselling at secondary school. In the first year, when a male student approached them for a conjugal alliance, they would typically respond: “I am not ready for courtship.” In the second year, they may respond, “My boyfriend is at the University of Ghana.” Some also said, “My boyfriend is abroad.” When they were in final year and some were concerned that they had not “grabbed” or been “grabbed”, they began to say to potential boyfriends, “When are you visiting me?” “I have some special food for you.” “Could we do the discussion in my room?” “Can we just take a walk?” Some were distressed if they were to return to a community where there were likely not many male university graduates. Quite often, the social status of these women did not allow them to have a relationship with their juniors and they usually targeted finalists. Eventually, the finalist took advantage of a desperate “widow” and leveraged it to fulfil his sexual pleasures. Such conjugal alliances collapsed with their final departure from the UCC. The urge to “grab” just before this created what is known as “September rush”. One reason for the “rush” is the social pressure to marry in Ghana.

The phenomenon of “widowhood”, also known as “*ye kura kura mu kwa*” (“we are just hanging on for nothing” from a song by one of Ghana’s popular musicians, Amakye Dede), was also common at the UCC. Usually, female freshers did not relish the idea of establishing conjugal relations with their coursemates. They usually preferred courting a finalist with the potential to secure a job just after school. This view is common among women who prefer to marry men older or more accomplished than them. In most cases, such relationships on campus did not work in the long term since the finalist left and never returned to campus after graduation. Women involved in these relationships became known as “widows”. Widowhood in many African cultures is dreaded by many women. This is because, among some Akan, for example, widowhood was one way of testing the innocence or culpability of a woman in the event of her husband’s death. [2] The name for “husband” in Akan is “*kunu*”, comprising of two morphemes – “*ku*” literally means “to kill” and “*nu*”, meaning “him”, which means “to kill”. This controversial term connotes the view that a husband is always at the mercy of his wife, i.e. a wife can easily “kill” a husband because she takes care of the man’s domestic needs (Brempong, 1991: 95).

This term reflects the Akan social system of matrilineal relations where the woman does not produce children for her husband’s family. It was, therefore, believed that the Akan man was likely to be irresponsible towards his children as he invested his wealth instead in his sister’s children. Because of the tendency of the Akan man to be irresponsible towards his children in the past, some Akan families required a potential son-in-law to swear the “foolish vow” as part of the marriage process. The foolish vow proceeded as follows: “This marriage relation I am establishing, if anything good comes out of it, it belongs to my wife and her family. If anything bad comes out of it, it belongs to me and my family.” [3] The Akan social system also explains why the bridewealth was not expensive, which made divorce easier and more common compared to some patrilineal societies in Ghana (Sarpong, 1974: 84).

Charles Prempeh

This social structure often created tension between Akan couples. The wife was, therefore, the first suspect in the event of the death of her husband. This partly explains the practice of rigorous widowhood rites. But widowhood rites were also seen as a way of ritually purifying the widow to get rid of bad luck and the contamination that death is generally considered to bring (Dolphyne, 1991: 24). The rite is expected to contribute to stabilising her emotional trauma. It must be mentioned that the UCC “widow” suffered some form of social marginalisation. If she was noted for shunning the proposal of her male coursemates, she became the subject of ridicule and gossip among her peers. She could be traumatised for months, which could affect her academic work.

There was also the “help-me-finish-my-degree” type of conjugal relationship. In the “help-me-finish-my-degree” relationship, men or women have an agenda. Usually, they had no sincere commitment to any form of conjugal relationship. They had a problem they wanted someone to help them solve, either with financially or academic demands. The quest for financial satisfaction usually came from male students. A male student may contract a “conjugal” alliance with a relatively well-to-do female student for free meals. Female students tended to be sympathetic towards male students from financially constrained homes. So, they cooked for them. Sometimes photocopied reading materials for them. Usually, they did this with the hope that the male student would reciprocate with “true” love. Quite often, it turned out that the male student was an opportunist. In the area of academics, a female student may pretend to love a male student with the hope that the male student would help her pass her exams or finish her long essay. Such male students were deceived into thinking that the female student genuinely loved them. In both types of relationships, the highest amorous benefit was a superficial romance. In the end, when the objectives of such instrumental conjugal relations were met, the illusions of such relations were exposed. This type of conjugal relationship feeds into moral philosophy. It begs the question of whether we are more altruistic or pragmatic in our ethical life. Do we love for the sake of love, or there is always a condition to our love? Is there any type of love without a particular altruistic or pragmatic reason?

Pornography and “optical nutrition”

This section on pornography and “optical nutrition” discusses the extent to which students deployed and articulated sexual expressions through ogling women or pornography. Through these alternatives, students satisfied their sexual needs and created logic to rationalise the process. It has been observed that pornographic materials are widespread in diverse forms. They may be found in advertisements, fashion, movies, music, video games, magazines, as well as on television, mobile devices, websites, and now online photo-sharing services (Anderson & Oppong, 2014: 200). Through the mediation of the Internet, it is easy for one to access pornographic materials in one’s pariah space. In the halls, particularly male halls, some students gratified their sexual desires by watching pornography in a group. This sense of collectivism in achieving a voyeuristic desire is one way of shedding the guilt associated with watching such material. In Casford, some young men who had not succeeded in wooing a lady spent the night watching pornography. Usually, the pornography was screened during late hours of the night at the Junior Common Room. The sound from such movies was muted, but it was always possible to hear some of the students moaning. The philosophy behind viewing pornography was that it was a better alternative to being jilted by a woman.

The practice of viewing pornography was sometimes characterised by the view that “Seeing is free, touching will cost you.” Coker (2018) refers to it as “browsing”. At the UCC, students pruriently viewing women, particularly the buttocks, would exclaim, “*Hwe, etu nie!*” to wit “Goodness!” What sort of buttocks are these!” The boldest of them would go as far as chanting, “*Tu pon wo skuul pon!*”, meaning “The hugest butt in the entire university” (Coker, 2018: 121). This practice of gazing at the buttocks of females was very common among male students. Usually, one hid in one’s room and peeped through the door to watch women lustfully as they passed. This was called “optical nutrition”. Usually, the best days for males to get “optical nutrition” was Saturdays and Sundays, when most female students wore their finest dresses to church. Women who usually escaped the prying eyes of male students were members of the Deeper Life Church, a conservative Pentecostal church in West Africa founded by William Folorunso Kumuyi. Their dresses covered their entire body and left no room for the contours of their bodies to be seen. They were considered a “killjoy”.

Nevertheless, Christian groups on campus were involved in romantic dramas. Some churches, like the Christ Embassy founded by Chris Oyakhilome, use young, beautiful women as ushers to attract men into the church. The Christ Embassy students fellowshiped in a building not far from Sasakawa Guest House and very close to the road. They took advantage of their strategic location and used these women to trap desperate male students into their fellowship. This practice of using women with a curvy body shape as ushers is similar to the use of women’s bodies in advertisements in Ghana and worldwide. Sometimes advertisements that have nothing to do with female body features include partially nude images of females. The objectification of females in such advertisements is one way of attracting the attention of viewers, particularly males.

Sex philosophies and ethics at the UCC

In this section, I discuss how the above sex preferences and practices shaped love philosophies and ethics on the UCC campus. Broadly, there were some sex philosophies and ethics at the UCC. The two sex philosophies came from Casford and ATL. At the Casford hall, it was believed that one’s entire life is constructed around two things: sex and food. This was expressed as: “What one will eat to sleep [food] and what one will sleep to eat [sex]”, with the Twi translation being: “*Nea obedi ada ene nea obeda edi*”. In Casford, it was believed that all human beings struggle to satisfy the palate and the prurient demands of the sex organ. This was not different from some traditional Akan societies who thought that when one feeds the mouth, one preserves life, and when one ‘feeds’ the vagina, one produces a new life. This was a way of intermeshing the productive and reproductive capacities of human beings. In summary, the philosophy of Casford was that sex and food were both symbiotic and existential needs for human beings to subsist.

At the ATL hall, it was believed that there were two things one was likely to find upon entering the hall. These two things were “breasts” and “sex”. The two words were not directly mentioned. Breasts were referred to as “breads” and sex as “eggs”. When repeatedly and reflexively saying these two words without breaks, one ended up saying “breast” and “sex”. This was further expressed in the activities of the Profane Association of West Africa (PAWA).

Charles Prempeh

During PAWA Night, which marked the converging point for other cognate halls – Commonwealth (Vandals, University of Ghana) and Unity Hall (Conti, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology). The ATL composed and remixed songs – including gospel music – with profanity. “Libation” was poured with the vagina as the focus of attention. The androcentric philosophy behind PAWA was to humble and defame the vagina. It was to deconstruct the supremacy of the vagina over the penis. PAWA Night, which featured only male performers, was widely patronised by the university community, including female students and some lecturers. Sex philosophies birthed sex ethics. For example, male “spiritual” leaders of Casford and ATL could not have sex while they occupied office. They were not to be seen interacting openly with women.

Given the above discussion, at the UCC any student who failed to achieve at least one of the three objectives of university education – a First Class, travelling, and “grabbing” – would be found crying in exasperation, “Me no First Class, me no burger, me no grab. O God, why?” Such a student was considered a “failure” and “the scum of the earth”. They were labelled the “accursed” of the university. To avoid this fate, most university students tried to at least “grab”.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the intricacies and creative ways students deploy language to engage in love, romance and sex at the UCC. These multiple expressions at the UCC show how students reinvent and create social norms to subvert taboos about sex. The discussion also feeds into the philosophy of creative pragmatism and poststructuralism where conventions are challenged to produce new approaches to meeting the sexual needs of human beings. Students use these words and terms to say things and envision ideas that would be impossible depending on “normative” language alone. It also demonstrates the use of language as a social identity marker, especially for young men and women. These terms could hardly be used by older adults who are expected to communicate in culturally and ethically acceptable fashion. The use of popular terms such as *nkoso*, “understanding”, “optical nutrition”, and “understanding” all point to the creativity young men and women deploy in fashioning their own popular cultures in Ghana. Whether some of these ways of expressing romantic love can be considered right or wrong should be considered matters of ethics, which has no universally accepted response to moral issues. Sexual harassment is not just about the penetration of sex organs or rape, but also objectifying the body of females. It is thus imperative to reconsider how male students seek visual pleasure and also humiliate females.

Notes

1. PAWA stands for Profane Association of West Africa. During the PAWA Night celebration, ATL hosts hall residents from the Commonwealth (Vandals) of the University of Ghana and Continental (Unity) of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.
2. I was told this by my family heads when my mother had to undergo widowhood rites after the burial of my father who died in December 2008.
3. Douglas Frimpong-Nnuroh’s Socio-cultural Lecture Note, UCC, 2006.

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Charles Prempeh

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